Shadows in the Mirror

Abagail Brown

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Acknowledgements

Survival is difficult. Although no one wants to survive the tales that are shared within, many have. Women, children, and even the occasional man has met with violence they neither deserved, and rarely escaped. These tales give hope, for survivors to escape. Connections to others like them, many of whom did escape.

A tremendous thank you to all who offer help that often you never see the results of. Years later, even decades later, those you help, will remember the assistance you gave.

May this novel assist others on their search for hope and acceptance in world often not designed for them.

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Chapter 1

Mistie Jolin at 18

Beige walls blurred in the noisy, crowded classroom.

"What happens if I mix beaker A with beaker B?" The teacher ignored the raised hands and focused on the quiet boy with glasses too big for his face.

Mistie attempted to focus on class. Chemistry. The meaning of life.

The teacher droned on about the dangers of mixing many common household chemicals. Baking soda, vinegar, peroxide, rubbing alcohol, and bleach were her choices for today's assignment.

As if they were ever seen in a home. Not that Mistie's home was normal. Maybe they did exist in other homes.

Knowing she would be called out of class in a few minutes made the hour drag on endlessly.

The letter said she had to meet Liza at 10:30. She folded it and tucked it into her book. It was 10:29 now. Of course, she couldn't leave until the office called her name over the loudspeaker, which would make her late to the meeting. Finding the office in the maze of hallways could take five minutes, or more.

"Please send Mistie Jolin to the office." The loudspeaker echoed though the room.

The teacher slowed the lecture to glance at her.

A few students gave her puzzled looks, while others smiled.

The quiet girl, being called out, not a good impression in a new school. Mistie grabbed her books and left.

These meetings with Liza always occurred about this time of year. What was their real purpose? When would they end? Why did the schools always insist she be late for the meetings? Didn't they know that made her look incompetent?

Mistie strolled through the halls as quickly as she could. She walked down the blue hallway, then the green, and turned at the red hallway. Oops. The red hallway ended at the cafeteria. She

stopped, sat down, and pulled out the building map she had been given a week ago, when she began classes here.

She had to go part way back up the red hallway, to turn left at the purple hallway, and right down the green hallway, to the yellow center section of the building.

By the time I figure out where I need to be in this school, the year, and graduation, will be over. She stood up slowly. No one had seen her. Misty spread the map out on top of her books and walked toward the purple hallway. Liza's letter fluttered underneath, in case any teacher stopped her to see why she was wandering the halls during the middle of morning classes.

Finally, she found the office buried in the middle of the building. She glanced at her watch. Eight minutes late! She ran to the office door, slammed it open, and skidded to a stop at the front desk, out of breath.

"The open office on the left." The lady at the reception desk glared at her.

Mistie gulped and walked to the room.

There was Liza. Tall, thin, and with her notepad beside her. The woman who always seemed to find where she lived. Once a year, Mistie had to report to her and answer questions, though no one told her why.

As a young child, it was fun to have a once year friend. Now, not so much. Who is this person? How did she found Mistie after every move? Why did she follow her and ask such odd questions once a year?

Mistie squared her shoulders and took two deep breaths. She gripped her books to her chest, and walked into the room.

"Hello Mistie, how are you?"

She looked at the woman across from her. Really looked. Not a hidden glance, like in previous years.

This woman was older. Older than her mother. Stranger. Quieter. Nicer. Oddly strange though. Not like the hyper busy people she met in the schools she attended.

Liza sat surrounded by notebooks and papers, her glasses askew on her face. "You can close the door. Our talks are always confidential. We have been such good friends. Did you ever have another friend like me?"

Mistie didn't move.

"Mistie, close the door and sit down. Don't act afraid."

Mistie shifted her feet. "I won't close the door. This time, I have the questions to ask of you."

Silence filled the room.

Mistie stared at Liza.

Liza's pen fluttered between two fingers.

"Okay, what are your questions?"

Thoughts raced through Mistie's head. She had rehearsed her speech a thousand times since the letter came that another appointment would be today. Oddly, those letters always came through the school nurse. She had never received one at home.

"Have you always filled out a questionnaire on me?"

Liza looked down at her papers and pen, then back up at Mistie. "Not always. I'm here to be your friend."

Mistie stared hard at her. "I'm not five! Do you think I am mentally ill, or something?"

Liza almost stood up. "Oh goodness no. Dear me. Child close the door and sit down."

Silence descended in the office behind her.

"I am not a child. I only see you once a year. You follow me everywhere I have ever moved. I have the right to know why. Are you going to follow me through my future workplaces as well?"

Liza looked over, then under her glasses, and pushed them up her nose to look through them, at this tall girl in front of her. "Yes, you are grown. Seeing someone once a year, you don't realize how fast they grow. It seems you were only five a few days ago."

Mistie moved her feet occasionally. Patiently waiting, as did the now silent office staff.

At last, to break the silence, she spoke. "Who are you really? What do you really want?"

Liza glanced back at the papers. "I want to know you, to know about you, and your life. My name is really Liza. Please sit, and tell me about how your life has been for the last year. Do you like this new school?"

Mistie laughed. "How can I know? I've been here a week. I don't even know my teacher's names. I couldn't find the office today on the first try. As usual, the teachers refused to let me leave class in

time to be here on time for our meeting. How do they expect me to show I am responsible if they refuse to allow me to be on time for a simple meeting?"

Liza only watched her. Her pencil balanced over her paper.

Mistie walked forward and sat down. "I want to see your questionnaire."

Liza glared at her and slid it over.

Mistie studied the questionnaire, half filled in, her name, height, weight, eye color; even her hairstyle and clothes were documented. The other questions were silly like how many friends she had, who they were, if they were popular, what her home life was like. She remembered these, asked every year, always worded a bit different. The same questions every year.

Mistie looked up at Liza, "Why?"

"I really can't answer that. It's important."

"You don't do this to other kids. I've asked."

Liza jumped. "You have? We do ask other kids as well."

"Who are you, and why do you ask others these questions if you are not a psychologist?"

"It's a secret. Don't you like secrets?"

"Liza, I'm not five. I realize secrets and lies are twin sisters, now whether identical or fraternal, depends on the situation."

The look on Liza's face startled Mistie. Multiple emotions raced through her face as it turned red, almost purple, and then back to a pasty pale. More pale than normal.

"Don't you remember all the fun we used to have? Chatting like friends, and you telling me stories about your life."

"A bit one sided, don't you think?"

"Remember when you told me about."

"I think it is time for me to leave." Mistie stood up and turned.

The whole office stared in the conference room door at her. All of these adults who had no idea who she was, were probably afraid she was some escaped kiddie criminal now.

A loud growl escaped her stomach. That's unusual. I ate three days ago.

The crowd stepped closer, blocking her into the room with Liza. Apparently, they expected the meeting to continue.

It could. On Mistie's terms. She turned back to face Liza. "You want to know my secrets? I have no friends. Moving every few months prevents it."

She glanced back at the office people. "I wish I knew why I am forced to move. Maybe you can tell me?"

Liza watched her, not even trying to write notes down.

"No one even noticed my obsessive compulsive control disorder. I've been battling it for years. I learned about it by reading. Now, I have it mostly under control. No longer addicted to cleaning, chewing gum, or writing down what I do every minute of every day."

An unknown person in the crowd gasped.

Mistie stepped forward and placed her hands on the desk. "No one notices my clothes aren't clean. Or my hair is stringy. I guess they think it is a personal choice."

Liza lifted the pencil, letting it drop. "Why?"

"No one hears me, or sees me. Here I am. Why are you studying me?"

Liza stared hard at her. She grabbed her papers. Ran around the desk, and out through the onlookers.

Mistie closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. At last, she turned around to face the office workers. They parted to make room for her.

A skinny, bald man whom she recognized as the counselor who had scheduled her classes grabbed her arm. "Why don't you wash your clothes and hair?"

Mistie, a foot taller than him, stared down into his bulging eyes. "I have no access to food or water when I am in the house I live in, no matter where we have lived. There is nothing you, or anyone, can do about it."

"Do you want out of there?" One of the women stepped forward.

Mistie wasn't sure who she was. "Yes. I have my plans. Don't mess with them." With that, she turned, walked out the door, and went to the restroom to clean up before she went to her next class. Math. Calculus.

She entered the nearest restroom. A girl from her literature class sat on the floor.

Mistie splashed her face with cold water. "I've never been so shook up after a meeting before."

The girl looked up at her. "Warm water would feel better on your face. Smile, the boys can't get to you in here."

The words of wisdom reminded her of someone she knew. As she searched her mind, and sorted through names, Tricia came to mind. This girl wasn't her.

Mistie stared at her. "Warm water isn't allowed, and I know how to fight the boys. They ignore me anyway. Are you okay?"

"Sure, it's almost class change time. Sick is all."

Mistie glanced at her again.

The girl's stomach bulged above her pants. The tight clothes, and lanky hair didn't help matters any. No, this wasn't Tricia.

Mistie walked out of the room and down the hall to her locker. Where will I be next year? Will Liza find me? How will I escape from this life I know can't be normal?

The class change bell rang.

Mistie glanced at her class schedule and map, and tried to decide which way to turn next.

Chapter 2

Liza, Cal, and Merlish - Forever Young - Year 19

Liza ran out of the school shaking. Her notepads and pencils dropped on the sidewalk. She had to stop and pick them up. Could Mistie see her? She raced onward to her car in the visitor's lot. She drove as fast as she dared back to the warehouse where she worked.

The slamming door echoed though the dark building.

Cal hunched over a row of computers, surrounded by piles of files.

"One more! You are not going to believe this. Mistie, like the others is out of control, only worse."

He tapped a few more keys and closed the file in front of him. "Which project are we discussing?"

"The twin study. 'The Forever Young' project."

"They are all, what? Fifteen? Sixteen? What do you expect? They are teenagers."

"Mistie is eighteen. She turned the tables on me. Then refused to close the door. The whole school office listened in. She refused to answer the questions." Liza stomped her foot.

"I would expect that. They are teens. Anyway, it's a hormonal time of year. Try again in the spring."

Liza plopped her folder down beside Cal. "I can't wait till spring. Most of them will graduate, and I have to track their next moves. If they don't drop out of school. Do you have any idea how tough it has been to track them, as so few stay in one place for any length of time? I'll never find them if they drop out of school."

The older man stared at his screen.

Why he didn't listen to her?

"I will talk about it with Merlish. Now go rest for a few days. You look exhausted."

Liza stomped halfway across the warehouse, then turned back. "You supervise far more projects than I do. Does anyone in any of your projects move around and make your job so difficult?"

"No Liza. They don't move. Maybe they are trying to escape from you."

Liza stomped off, and slammed the door behind her. Something was wrong with those girls.

Why had the project been all girls, and no boys? Why had they moved so often? Sometimes they changed schools several times a year. And their grades were barely passing, if that. Except for Mistie. She excelled at school. Even though her teachers said she complained of failing.

She sat in her car and waited. Something was wrong. Cal didn't take her seriously. Nor did Merlish. Neither had ever listened to her concerns about the safety of those girls. There was only a little time to save them.

Her contacts were the teachers. They did what they could. Encouraging the girls to do better. Supplying them with school supplies, and even clothes that Liza bought for them when needed.

She drove to the store. She had almost enough money to buy what she needed. A little hamburger meat and some noodles. Not enough for a seasoning packet.

"Is that all today?" The cashier asked.

Liza pushed her change and dollar bills to the cashier. "All I have today."

"What more would you like?"

A dangerous question. More than this cashier could give. "I'd like a seasoning packet. I don't enough change today."

The woman in line behind her reached over and handed her one. "Ring it up on mine. I'm buying three on sale today."

Liza stared.

"Go on."

The cashier nodded.

"Thank you." Liza picked up her meagre bag of groceries for dinner. And lunch tomorrow.

At the door, the manager waited. "See me, if you need help."

"I have a job."

The man nodded. "I know. And you buy for others, and forget yourself. So, we want to help."

"Thanks." Liza left the store and drove toward home. A seasoning packet wasn't much to share. These people she didn't know wanted to help her, as much as she wanted to help the girls they would never know.

Chapter 3

Tricia Forrester - Age 18

Tricia prepared a dinner tray for her Gramma. There had been so many losses in her family lately, including her dad a few years ago to an accident at work. Now her Gramma's cancer had spread throughout her body. Plus, there was always that feeling of someone missing.

She steadied the food and drink on the tray, and wiped a tear away. She looked to the right, as always, though the place was empty, as it ever was. Someone belonged there. She couldn't cry now. This was no time to miss a shadow person. She walked to the large bedroom in the house and peeked through the door.

A breeze rustled through the open window. The last rays of the setting sun drifted gently in, caressed the windowsill, stroked the curtains, and brushed the hair on the pillow, before they rested on the lips of the pain ravaged face. The lips began to whisper as if in answer to Tricia's own thoughts. Her Gramma spoke softly to her mother. "Before you were born, I always felt I heard two heartbeats. Twins were always so common in our family."

The dimmed sunlight seemed to reflect more of the form of the speaker in a hospital bed. She slowly reached her hand out to her daughter, sitting close beside her. "It saddened me to know there was only one child. Though you brought me great joy."

Her mother gently touched her Gramma's hand.

Tears slipped down Tricia's cheeks as the glow slowly receded back through the curtains. She stepped out of sight of the quiet moment between mother and daughter. Someday, she would be the daughter comforting her mother.

"I always felt the same way with Tricia. She was such a tiny baby for all of my weight gain."

Her mother's words struck deep into an old fear she dared not name. What if her dreams were true?

Her mother hollered down the echoing hallway. "Tricia, what was the name of your 'twin' when you were young?"

Tricia hurried into the matriarch's bedroom, carefully stepping around years of accumulated objects. "Her name was Mistie."

"Do you know where she might have gone?" Her mother glanced at her as she squeezed her own mother's pain ravaged hand.

"I have no idea where she is. The day she left was too sad. Why do you ask about her now?" Tricia sat the tray on the table.

They adjusted her Gramma so she could eat.

Instead, her Gramma's voice creaked as she spoke with a faraway look in her eyes. "I never felt there was any good that would come from bringing up the past."

As her eyes wandered around the objects in the room, they paused on the last few boxes she had insisted on going through. "It bothers me more as I wait now."

At last, she brought her tired eyes back to her daughter and granddaughter. "If my dream daughter were here, you would have an aunt. You were given her name."

A slight gasp of surprise, and a faded memory tried to awaken. It flitted about the room, rather like a butterfly, almost out of reach.

"If your mother's dream daughter were here, you would have two sisters."

"Gramma, she is always my sister in my heart. How would we find her now?"

The lady lay back on her pillows as if almost asleep. She seemed to dose off a bit, or maybe make peace with some internal plight.

With another look around the room, she spoke softly, full of hope and strength for her daughter and granddaughter. "I have been going through many years of accumulated things. Sell them, send them out into the world with prayers that they will find and comfort the lost daughters. The trail took many. Others were lost to the Education and Adoption schemes. Over the years, I would occasionally send small treasures in search of the missing women, with hopes to draw them near." A tear formed and almost slipped out of her eye before she blinked it away.

Tricia and her mother each held one of her Gramma's hands. They would be lost without her firm guidance which they had relied on for so long. Names no longer spoken, long forgotten of sisters,

mothers, aunts, and grandmothers who had not survived the Trail of Tears. So many more, unaccounted for had disappeared at the off reservation boarding schools. More descendants lost during the decade around her mother's birth to adoptions by strangers who had no affiliation with their tribes.

At last, her gramma's gaze looked between them, out the window as the last ray of sunshine receded beyond the horizon. She spoke one last time in a whisper. "Eleanor, I must leave it all to you now."

She paused for breath, with both women listening for every word. "I have walked the long walk, and am ready for peace."

As the matriarch's eyes closed for the last time, tears of sadness and joy filled Helen and Tricia's eyes. They sat in silence holding her hands and willing her spirit on to the land of eternal summer.

Chapter 4

Mistie goes to college - Age 19

Tall buildings loomed ahead. Mistie had never been in such a large place before. The stillness and safety of their waiting rooms was a blessing she had only dreamed existed. At least soon, she would be safe. That open gate was her entrance to freedom.

Her mother turned the radio station off as they entered the gates to the college campus. "Where do we go?"

Mistie glanced at the paper in her hands. "The first building on the right."

"I don't see any parking places." Her mother steered the car around a crowd of students looking at paper instead of where they going.

"Over there." Mistie pointed to a visitor spot near the door.

Before long, she made it through the line to get her room assignment. Scarcely soon enough.

Her mom fidgeted with her keys and glanced at all the young men walking by.

"Ready to go to the dorm. Three buildings down on the left." She climbed back in the car.

"Okay." Her mom backed up slowly and carefully. Then she pushed the gas pedal too hard, and veered into oncoming traffic. Horns honked at her impatience. Students scattered.

At the dorm, parking was even more limited. Happy and laughing people carried in whole trucks full of items. Clothes overflowed arms. Bags and boxes were stacked around vehicles.

She picked up her suitcase of clothes, and a bag of bedding. Not much.

Her mom carried in a box of writing and office supplies.

Two trips in and they were done.

She turned to her mother. "I have to go to a class in ten minutes. We have all kinds of classes this week, and no time for visiting."

"It's only orientation week." Her mother collapsed on the unmade bed.

"No. They expect us to start on life here as soon as possible. See my schedule. I'm already late." Mistie flashed the overflowing pages towards her mother. She grabbed her packed book bag, and ran out to the orientation meeting as fast as possible.

"No last visits?"

She didn't look back. Well, it's not entirely false. I wouldn't have time to deal with her with this booked schedule.

Chapter 5

Merlish, Cal, and Liza - Forever Young - Year 19

Cal glanced at the filing cabinet beside him.

Merlish stepped out and sat down beside Cal. He grabbed the folder Liza had dropped.

"She is beginning to not trust them, much as we don't."

"I know. Something is not right with 'The Forever Young' study. The more I learn about the man who asked me to do it, the more I wonder. The more I fear."

Cal leaned back in his chair and looked at the screen again. "Shall we take her off the project? I can have all the information entered on the other three ongoing projects by tomorrow. She can review and take over them."

He read the file. Merlish looked up. "Yes, I think we have to. Has she seen them all this year?"

"No, she has three more visits. One with Ginny and Tammy, two identicals living separately next week. Then, a visit with the two fraternals, Kelly and Casey who live together."

Merlish sighed. This was not the way retirement should begin. "Perhaps you should go with her on those visits. Read up on each of the girls. Find out why their study is so different than any other twin study we have ever completed." The now nearly empty warehouse was reduced to a pile of boxes near this one row of tables. It had once been a busy, buzzing place. Full of activity as various studies were catalogued here.

"What do you think is happening to these girls? I might expect one or two to have difficulties, but so many? Is it genetics?"

Merlish picked up the file and placed it by Liza's computer to input the data later. "I don't think so. Is it the constant moves? We even have studies to compare them to for that. I need to look deeper. I may meet with some of these girls myself."

Cal reached for the last folder in the box by his side. "Have you ever met any of their families?"

"Only when the embryos were implanted. The mothers seemed normal then. Sacred, apprehensive, concerned about the medical

procedure. It was all new technology." He tapped a pencil on the table.

Cal glanced at him. "There was something else wasn't there?"

"Now that I think back, there was a haunted look in each woman's eyes."

They stared at each other.

"These women, all single mothers I think, were chosen because?" Cal glanced at his boss.

"The man wanted a study to compare single women in multiple environments. He wanted a twenty-five-year study. We were starting out here. The grant money was good. I never thought anything about who they were, or why. Records weren't as thorough then, as they are now. Studies were often kept quiet for confidential reasons."

"We have a lot of work to do. I hope it's not too late." Cal clicked save on a file.

"We can't change anything until we have actual concrete facts. All we have now is speculation. Help Liza finish this year's contacts, then we will see what she can do." Merlish turned the chair.

"I can research as soon as I finish these last few boxes. Then all of our years of work will be on the servers." Cal pointed to the dwindling stack to his right. "Quiet is nice. Though I miss having people to help."

"I don't even know where to look for more concrete facts. Give me a few days." Merlish stood up and strode towards the door Liza had so recently slammed.

What happened and why? Why hadn't he realized the problem sooner? Why hadn't he listened to Liza when she voiced her concerns every year? The oddities had seemed so trivial. Shy quiet girls in a secret twin study. What was unusual about that? No one would think anything of it. Except, the data said it was wrong. Too many quiet and shy girls for one study.

Merlish opened the door and walked out into the cool fall air. Hopefully, spring would bring answers, and not more accusations.

Chapter 6

Tricia - Gramma's preparations

It had been a busy night, notifying authorities, calling distant family, and preparing the body for cremation. It was Tricia's Gramma's wish to have her ashes scattered far from the city. There was a special place she often had often spent time relaxing and meditating on the river. A place where she could watch troubles slide away, as new dreams drifted by, hers for the grabbing. They would wait till spring to signal a new beginning. Meanwhile reservation relatives would celebrate her life in the traditional manner soon.

Tricia prepared breakfast. That journey in the spring would mean many things to her.

Her mother sat silent at the table, almost buried in paperwork. She seemed not to notice the sunrise glistening on the dew, or the birds chirping the songs that signaled the beginning of fall. The weight of her missing sister, and daughter, hung heavy on her shoulders. Pride would not let her head fall forward.

"Momma, I'll write the eulogy, something she will be proud of." Tricia carefully moved the papers aside to set down the coffee.

Tears brimmed in her mother's eyes. "There's plenty of time."

"I want to read it at the viewing. Some of our distant family may want to know her better."

"If they had wanted to know her, they would have visited more often."

Tricia organized the paperwork on the table. "Perhaps. Our cousins are so busy in sports; I don't know when they would find the time."

Her mother seemed to stare into the past, searching for elusive answers to questions never asked.

Her mother returned to the present. "Most of her things are boxed. She went through the whole attic in the last few months. If the cancer hadn't killed her, all the lifting would." She stirred her coffee cup.

"She would never have done it if she couldn't have." So many boxes to sort and find a place for. Their home looked more cluttered than when they had moved in with Gramma. "Would you have denied her the right to relive her life and memories one last time?"

"No. Her pain from the cancer was so great. She will suffer no more." Her mother finished her last drop of coffee, and lost herself in thought again. After setting the cup down carefully, and leaving her breakfast untouched, she walked resolutely towards the first stack of boxes to begin the task of sorting out her mother's past.

Her Gramma, prepared as always, had labeled a good many of the boxes, saving them much time and energy.

After many phone calls to various relatives, friends, and charities, nearly everything had a new home.

Chapter 7

Mistie in College - Age 19

Mistie settled into classes and attempted to make friends. Her OCD demanded that she spend as much time as possible on her studies. Planning each day down to the minute.

Required college orientation classes made this worse, as they attempted to teach time management skills to those who hadn't learned them. Pushing a false sense of lack of maturity, this class multiplied her OCD anxiety about being on time to the point that she refused to plan classes with only fifteen minutes between them, as there would not be enough time to go from one class to the next. If a professor decided to run a few minutes over while lecturing, there was no time to sprint across campus.

After the orientation class, she raced to meet her student advisor. "Why did they tell us only ten minutes? Don't they know that at least twenty minutes would be needed to run from the east side of campus, to the west side? They should give us enough time for a restroom break after two hours of elementary school lectures!"

A tall girl running beside her chuckled.

"They mean well. Relax. They don't expect you to run."

"The why are you running?"

"You raced out so fast you forgot this paper on the desk. It might be important." She panted as she handed the sheet to Mistie.

It was a list of common sense organization tips. "Here," she handed it back to the young woman. "If it will help you."

"I'll take it if you don't want it. Who knows, it might help my sister. I'm Tina."

"I'm Mistie, and late, so have to run. Have a good day." She turned and raced the last few steps to the building she was looking for. A glance at her paper showed where in the building her advisor was located. She hurried up three flights of stairs. I'll never learn to make friends that way. I'll have to learn to stop and speak more. When I'm not late.

At the door to her advisor's office, she knocked and promptly forgot her goal of making friends.

She planned a full schedule of classes with little room for fun. Even though her advisor suggested she look to add some extra activities, she didn't feel she had the time or energy to devote to them, if she wanted to finish college with a good degree. Her planner burst with a busy class and homework schedule, as well as her hope for a part time job. "Am I up for the challenge? How do I manage classes, homework, and meeting people?"

A week later, Mistie walked into her Criminal Perspectives class and looked for the best seat to hear the professor from. It was a small room, and not set up for the professor to amble between rows. She sat in the second row, middle seat. Being twenty minutes early gave her plenty of time to arrange her books and paper to be ready when the professor walked in. She glanced up as a young man sat down beside her.

"Hi, I'm Justin."

She was supposed to be trying to meet people. "Hi, I'm Mistie." Not knowing what else to say, she glanced at his desk, and saw he was almost as organized as she was. She smiled.

As the days went by, she realized Justin was in several of her classes. Sometimes he would speak to her before class, asking about a point they had studied the day before. Other days, a smile was their only communication.

The professor droned on about how to write the group work paper she expected the next week.

A group project. Yuck. Depending on others always led to more work than necessary.

"Can we meet Saturday to plan the paper?" Justin toyed with his pencil over his calendar.

She had to work with someone. Might as well be someone as organized as herself. "Be at the library at 10 am."

"That'll work." He wrote it down. Then, he picked up his books and walked to the back of the room where he stopped to talk to the girl who had chased her that first day.

Mistie arrived at the appointed library study area Saturday.

Justin and Tina talked and laughed in a corner.

She hadn't paid any attention to Tina. The girl talked more in an hour, than she had ever talked in a year.

Tina waved. "Come on Mistie. This will be fun."

"So, which criminal do we investigate?" Mistie hovered over them. This wasn't such a good idea. Maybe she should do her own project and make up partner names. The professor would never know.

Tina laughed. "You are going about it the wrong way."

She flashed a newspaper at them. "Here is a paper from my home. Now, we have a specific crime, and I know the location, and the victim. I think I know the criminals. So, let's see if we can solve the crime before the police do, and figure out why the criminals committed the crime."

Mistie hadn't been sure she would enjoy a day spent with Tina and Justin. After all, Tina was a chatterbox.

Instead, Tina had made the whole day fun for Mistie. Mistie had even laughed, though they looked at her funny when she did. She realized her laugh sounded forced because she hadn't done it in so long.

A month later, they received their project work back. They made a decent grade. Not her usual high marks.

Tina walked up to Justin and Mistie's desks.

"I always sit in the back because I talk too much." She handed them a newspaper clipping. "I knew who did it and why. Read the confession."

Even though crime isn't funny, they had to laugh. Solving the reason for the crime was easy. The suspects had "stolen" a cat trap used to catch feral cats because their Yorkie had escaped from them and ran into the trap. The kids didn't know how to release their pet. The trap was at the vet's office, because the kids were too frightened to take it back after the homeowner returned home before they had been able to return the now empty trap.

While this case turned out to be more of a misunderstanding, as all the kids in the neighborhood were scared of the homeowner, it fit the needs of recognizing unusual reasons an apparent theft might occur.

Mistie smiled. If only all misunderstandings could be so easily solved.

Chapter 8

Liza - Forever Young - Year 19

Liza entered her two-room apartment. She put away the hamburger for now, and plopped down on the sofa. It wasn't much. It was a home. Here, she sat and worried about these girls, and their mothers for years. Having never married herself, each of the eleven girls mattered as much to her, as if they were her own children. Here, she had often wondered what she would do if one, or even all of them, could visit.

That hungry look in their eyes, it had been there for years. The girls looked thin, too thin. However, since thin was in, no one paid it any attention. The kitchen area was tiny. She could prepare meals they had never even thought of. She stood slowly and walked to her fridge. There was little food for her. There was plenty if one of the girls ever asked to escape. She could always buy more on the way home. Maybe she should help them find a way to escape, after all they were almost all eighteen now.

She glanced toward the door to her tiny bedroom. No, there wasn't room even for a sleeping bag there. She would find a way, or have Cal take them all out of town. As soon as they turned eighteen, she had to find a way to make them escape. Even if Merlish fired her for disrupting the study.

She walked back to prepare her dinner. It would have to last a few days, unless she asked the store manager to help her. With their jobs ending in two years, she'd have to plan for the future soon.

Liza spent the next few days trying to figure out how to convince Cal to help the girls escape from their unhappy homes. Of course, she knew his response would be. "They have six more years to be studied."

Her response back was planned. "We have given them eighteen years, what better way to study them than in our own care?"

With that thought she drifted off to sleep. Going back to see Cal and input Mistie's file, would bring back her fears. For the moment, she dreamed of rescuing the remaining girls, and her own high school friend who had given birth to one of the twins.

Chapter 9

Tricia - Gramma's Release - Spring

The hike up the steep hill began well before sunlight. It was a place their Gramma used to come to meditate and dream. It had reminded her of the reservation when she was a small girl, before the school took her away. What had she seen and thought here?

Tricia had been here many times herself. She often sat under a specific tree and thought of Mistie. Her missing sister. She would dream of them being little girls, chasing butterflies round and round. A few colorful ones hovered near the tree today.

The slope beyond would not be easy for her mother. With the help of Quin and Eleanor, she would make it there, to share her memories.

At last, they reached the top, a vast clear expanse, overlooking the Mississippi River. As the sun began to rise, Tricia raised her arms up high. She held the urn of ashes over her head and recited what she had written:

Like mother, like daughter,
Goddess of the moon,
Selene watches over us,
Leaving Helen to carry on her task.

Patricia, Quin, and Eleanor,
Must find the missing ones,
To bring Selene's dream to pass.

The daughters returned -
Mistie and another Patricia,
Home together at last.

As the first ray of sunshine stretched across the land, it appeared to the watching family to hover on the tip of the urn.

Tricia lowered her arms forward to release her Gramma's ashes.

A spring breeze caused the ashes to dance as they shimmered towards the Mississippi River to journey on to the sea.

A sense of hope welled up through the small family as they helped their mother down the now glistening hillside. Tricia followed last, lingering to send her thoughts both to her Gramma, and to her missing sister.

How will I find them? Do they even want to be found? What will I say when I find them? As she turned to look away from the river, a sob rose in her throat. Are they alive, or has Gramma gone to join them?

She took a deep breath and hurried to catch up with her mother, brother, and sister. The only family she knew for sure that lived with her, here, in this world.

Chapter 10

Mistie visits Patty Jolin - Age 19

A few weeks later, the walls of the tiny dorm room seemed to be closing in. Mistie stared at the books in her lap, not seeing the pages. "I could use a weekend off. Studying too much, I guess. Time to plan something fun. A day off to come back refreshed."

The calendar beside her was filled with places to be, and books to study. Justin and Tina were probably doing something fun. She had never called either of them, and wasn't sure if she should.

The phone rang.

"Will you please come home. I need you." Her mother whispered into the phone.

Mistie knew this cry. It could signal the next crisis. This time, there was a different quality to it. She felt hope for her mother. "I can't come home. I have a thirty-page paper to write, and lots of reading to do."

"Please. I need to clean this place up a bit. You haven't been home in ages."

It had only been two months. She knew why she hadn't been there. It didn't scare her to think of going back. It didn't make her happy. "Okay. I'll be there for the weekend. Not sure how long I can stay."

Mistie rented a car and drove to the house. It was still standing. Arriving at the scheduled time, no car was there. No surprise. Her mother had never been dependable. She stepped out of the car and walked around the deserted yard. It hadn't been mowed, perhaps since her mother had lived there. There was no light on in the house. She didn't knock.

Three hours later her mother arrived. She jingled her keys and waved to Mistie.

Mistie stepped to the porch of the house she had lived in for one year.

Her mother hung back. "It's not the same. I need help. You might want these." She handed Mistie thick yellow plastic gloves and a respirator.

"I haven't been gone that long." Mistie put them on.

Her mother opened the front door.

The sight that greeted her took her breath away. She wasn't even sure where to begin looking. Floor to ceiling was piled with garbage. Rotting, molding, stinking things tumbled out everywhere. Most objects were unrecognizable. Open milk jugs pointed down, streams of thickened yellowish puddles dribbled down unrecognizable objects below them. Yellowed newspapers, and crumpled boxes littered what had once been a walkway.

"It has gotten a bit out of hand. I need your help."

"There isn't even a pathway."

"Be careful what you lean on as you walk through."

Mistie stared at her. This is worse than ever. She attempted to scramble through the room, toward the doorway to the hall.

A narrowing of the piles of garbage. She stepped on through into the hallway, and looked at the former bathroom. Now nothing but rust and water everywhere. No visible floor under the piled wet clothing and rags.

She moved on to her old room. Surprisingly empty. A stinky, rotted yellow soaked mattress, moldy walls, and piles of animal poo all over the floor. At least she hoped it was animal. There was a thin and greasy looking cat hunched in a corner. It hissed at her.

The door to her brother's room was open. As open as possible. Barely enough room for a paper-thin body to slip through. Garbage was piled up to the mattress. The bed was so high off the floor a ladder would be needed if the floor were clean. Plastic and glass bottles littered the uncovered mattress.

She slipped and slid back into what had been the living room.

The old couch was piled with garbage. Her mother sat there amidst piles of magazines and fast food bags. "I'm not sure how it got so bad. I need help cleaning. I have a box of twenty trash bags. Will you help me?"

Twenty? That wouldn't even clear the couch. It was a start. Maybe.

They spent the next few hours picking up garbage. At first, they made a six-inch wide walkway to the bathroom. Then they ran out of bags.

"I can go buy some more. It isn't far to the store. You really do need some help." Mistie said. I wish I knew what to do to help her. She is trying so hard.

"Mistie, I am proud of you. You did a great job raising yourself. I made so many mistakes. I wish."

"It's okay. Friends now?"

The woman sank down on the debris covered couch and grabbed at a pill bottle. She nodded at Mistie.

Mistie escaped to the nearest store to buy a few boxes of trash bags. At least, they had made a little progress stacking the bags behind the house. She hid three full trash bag boxes under the driver's seat. That way, it would be easy to keep the box they were working full, until they made more progress. There was no way they would complete it in one weekend. Anything could set her mother off. She'd have to be careful.

By morning, the mess looked no better. In fact, a few large piles had been disturbed, and slid part way into the narrow walkway. Mistie knew it would take a few dumpsters to clear the garbage out of that house.

She wiped her forehead to clear the sweat. "Mom, let me call and find us a dumpster. It would make the job faster. The trash truck can only handle so many bags at one time." That was a stupid thing to say.

"Are you crazy! No one can come here! No one can see this! Everyone out there has to think we're perfect!"

Mistie stepped back. "Mom, when was the last time the garbage was collected?"

"Long enough. I don't want nasty people in my yard! They might see me."

Mistie glanced at the couch side table. Sure enough, it was littered with open pill bottles.

Her mother gathered to hurricane strength, screaming and yelling, about to physically attack her.

"Mom. I want to help. Maybe I should go back to school."

"Go, and don't come back."

Mistie hurried out of the house. It was safer. Of course, her mom would calm down in a week or so, and act as if nothing had happened. "Why can't I learn not to offer suggestions?" She tapped the dashboard of the rented car, and hoped the trashy smell would not linger when she returned it.

Chapter 11

Liza and Cal visit Ginny and Tammy - Forever Young - Year 19

Liza opened the warehouse door.

Yellow lights flickered on the once full floor.

She closed the door softly. Her shoes clomped as she walked to her computer station.

Mistie's file waited on the empty desk.

She placed her hand on the folder.

Footsteps echoed behind her. "Here is some coffee for you." Cal handed her a cup brimming with coffee and creamer.

"Glad you took a few days off. My boxes are all finished. Years of data is now in the computer for the first time. Merlish can finish the reports."

"Are you glad the studies are all almost complete? What will you do when the data is published?" Liza pulled out her chair.

"We have a few years. First, each study has to be compared to itself; then to all the other studies. Then there will be reports and books to write. No hurry. We will all be ready to retire from our life's work once all of that is done."

Liza sat down and stared at the folder. Her hand rested on it, but she could not bring herself to open it.

Cal pulled up a chair. "We will finish your project together."

Liza wasn't sure what was happening, she didn't like it.

"When, and where do you go next?" Cal leaned back in his chair.

"I go to see Ginny and Tammy, two identicals being raised apart, who live about 20 miles away from each other tomorrow. They've never met each other." She reached to the two folders in the waiting section of her file.

"Honestly, they seemed similar last year, both with single mothers, as they all are. However, they don't act like the kids in any of the other twin studies."

She peeked across her glasses at Cal. "I have read some of the reports from many of the other studies. I can't put my finger on the difference."

"I will drive. How far is it? What time do you want to meet here?" Cal stared at her behind his fingers.

"It's a five-hour drive. I would leave tonight, after inputting Mistie's data, that way I am rested. Ten hours on the road, and two interviews, is too much for one day."

"Okay. Let me know when, and I'll be ready."

Cal turned back to his computer.

Liza picked up Mistie's folder. Her hands shook as she opened the cover and saw the blank page from a few days ago. She filled in the page, and added the expected data into the new system.

Cal parked in the visitor's spot at the high school where Ginny should be in class.

She stepped out of the vehicle. "I hope she hasn't disappeared since last week."

"Have they disappeared when you come to visit?"

"A few times. Sometimes out sick, or the girl was removed from school the day before. Then, I have to search and find them again."

"That is unusual." Cal closed the door and stepped up beside her. "Lead the way."

Liza and Cal entered the conference room they were directed too. They waited on Ginny to arrive.

About ten minutes later, a thin girl slunk into the office, holding her books as if they would protect her from something.

"Hi Ginny, how are you? This is my friend Cal. He is here to visit today as well."

Ginny glared at him. She stepped back, sat down, and hid her face behind her books.

Liza felt Cal glance at her as she closed her eyes. Why were they all like this? All except Mistie?

"Ginny, tell me about yourself? How have you been for the last year?"

"Here, there, wherever."

"Do you have any friends?"

"No. People are afraid of me. They stare."

Liza closed her eyes. If the child would only sit up straight, or stand up straight, she might have a chance. "How has your mom been?"

Ginny merely hid her eyes.

Cal leaned forward. "Ginny, what are you afraid of?"

Ginny looked at the floor and whispered. "The men in the dark."

Cal shifted in his seat.

"Can you explain? Who? When?" Liza leaned forward.

Ginny gulped, as she drew her body into as tight a ball as possible.

Liza reached across the table. "Here Ginny, have a chocolate bar. Relax. Let's talk like we used to. Would you like Cal to leave?"

Ginny ignored the question, and the food.

Liza pulled her hand back. "Ginny, what would you like to do next year?"

Ginny glanced up, then back at her books. "Forget to wake up." She jumped up and stormed out of the room as fast as her legs could run.

The tension eased.

Liza glanced at Cal's shocked face as she reached for the offered treat. "It's getting worse. I offered food because I found out Mistie wasn't getting any. You can see Ginny is starved. No one notices their thinness."

Cal never said a word as they left the building and drove to the next school, only thirty minutes away.

The next school loomed in front of them. Cal parked in a visitor spot.

A shiver went down Liza's spine. "We have to be careful here. Mistie is here as well. I don't think she knows Tammy."

Cal followed her to the same room Liza had interviewed Mistie in the week before.

The office staff stopped their morning chores to watch them closely.

After ten minutes, the receptionist came in. "She isn't in class. We are having trouble finding Tammy."

Liza sat quietly. Her patience thinned as she read over Tammy's past notes.

Two sets of bells rang. Another ten minutes passed.

A young woman was ushered in. She looked startlingly thin, much as Ginny had. However, her belly hung out over her pants. Maybe it was only because her shirt and pants were several sizes too small.

Liza glanced up carefully. Something was different about this child. She barely looked alive. "Hi Tammy, my friend Cal has come with me today. Is that okay?"

Tammy's face reddened as she sat down.

Cal straightened up in his chair. He tugged it closer to the table.

"Tell me about your last year? I haven't seen you in a long time. How are you?"

Tammy pulled her eyes off of Cal. "I still have those nightmares."

"What nightmares?"

"The ones where I wake up naked with someone with a video camera watching me."

Liza glanced at Cal. "They haven't gone?"

Tammy bounced up in her seat. "Well, not until the last few months. I always have those dreams when momma's friends come and visit."

"You do? Tell me more about them." Cal's knuckles whitened.

"They are old, so they have to have my bedroom. I have to sleep on the couch. I wake up hot, sticky, sweaty, and pee everywhere when they visit. I only wet myself when they visit, and momma doesn't understand why."

Cal grabbed Liza's leg under the table and pinched hard.

Tammy got up and walked over to Cal. She put her arms around his neck. "See, they like me to hug them, and kiss on them. I don't know why. They are ugly."

Cal glanced at Liza.

Liza pulled Tammy's arms off of Cal.

Cal breathed a sigh of relief.

"Tammy, please, eat this." Liza handed a nut bar to the teen. "Please sit down."

Tammy grabbed the food and ran around the table, devouring the snack in seconds. "Momma got mad when the school nurse said I needed to go to the doctor to see why I am so thin and have a fat belly. I like it. I am finally developing into a full-grown person. I think most people eat more often than I am allowed to. Can you

believe they allow a food time for kids every day? I can't imagine what it must be like to be able to eat every single day."

"Is there anything else you would like to tell us?" Liza breathed deeply.

"No, not today. Maybe next year. I am happy thinking about next year." She jumped up and bounced out of the room. The wrapper wiggled on the floor.

"Thank you. That child scared me. Anything I could do, or not do, to stop it would be illegal."

Liza gathered her papers. "I know. I had no idea Tammy was in such a bad situation. I have no idea what to do for her though."

As they stood up to leave, a woman walked in. "Hi, I'm the school nurse. I am worried about Tammy."

"So are we," Liza said.

"A few months ago she was so depressed she was talking suicide. Then, all of a sudden she is all bubbly and happy, and gaining weight in her belly and breasts. We called her mom and asked her to take Tammy to the doctor. Her mom didn't say much. Said she didn't have healthcare."

Liza and Cal nodded. That wasn't unusual for single mothers.

"I don't think her mom works, and she sounded asleep. Anyway, last week we gave Tammy a pregnancy test."

The nurse stared at Liza and Cal.

"It came back positive. The child has no idea what is happening to her. We asked her, and she doesn't know a thing she should have learned in health class."

Cal's mouth dropped.

"I am not surprised. These children, something is wrong. They seem so smart. Though they have no clue about life. I've studied them for years, and don't know the answers." Liza hugged her papers to her chest.

The nurse reached her hand forward, almost in a fist. "What we want to know is; who are you? What are you doing to these children?"

"Be sure there are no children in the office and we will explain." Cal stepped back to the chair he had sat in.

The nurse was gone only a few moments. When she returned, she pulled up a chair and blocked the exit door.

"Sit down and relax. First, we have nothing to do with their current conditions, only with their existence. Nineteen years ago, we were commissioned to begin a twin study with a supply of eggs and sperm each from only one donor. It has been our duty to follow those children as they have grown." Cal rubbed his hands together.

"We have no idea what is happening, or has happened, but we, and our boss, promise to get to the bottom of it." He lowered his face.

"Right now, there isn't anyone who can do anything, at least, not with the limited data we have. We can't prove anything." Liza touched her plastic folder to her chin. The chill was refreshing.

The nurse glared at them. "You better. Your organization will be checked. Sorry, it's for the safety of the children, I have to." She stood up, glared at both Cal and Liza. She stalked out of the room.

"Nurse!" Cal stood as he spoke.

The nurse turned to look back.

"Please, give us time. Our employer is on the track of what is going on here. This involves more than one, or even two girls. Suspicions began a few years ago, but nothing could be proved. We are gathering as much information as we can, to make sure they receive as much justice as possible."

"Tammy will be eighteen in two months. I have to act now, before it is too late."

Cal handed her his business card. His hand shook as the nurse took it. "Please speak with Merlish. Call the police if you like. They are aware we are gathering evidence."

"Nurse, please think of the best interests of these young women. What do they want? What can we do to help them? If we take them away right now, they won't know what to do, or where to go. The foster care system would kick them out in a few months. And it could be more dangerous." Liza said.

The nurse took the card and left without another word.

Chapter 12

Tricia trying to remember Mistie - Age 19

Tricia ignored the steaming teacup in front of her. The television show from last night haunted her. Women who survived severe trauma often became trapped in that traumatic event. Had Mistie's life turned into a dim present? Could she brighten her future?

Her mom sat at the kitchen table and seemed to drift off into space. Watching out the window, looking for the answers they had not found. Her tea cup no longer steamed.

"Mom, what do you remember?"

Her mother glanced back at her daughter. She sat her cup down. "Can you be a little more specific please?"

"Did you ever feel you had a twin? Did you ever see her?"

Her mom reached for Tricia's hand. "Yes and no. I don't think I ever really thought about a twin." She twisted her napkin.

"I think I did meet her once. I almost want to forget the haunted eyes I saw. She wasn't like me. At least I hope I am not like her."

Dad's death a few years ago had nearly destroyed her mom. She had leaned so much on Gramma, and now, even she was gone. Were three children enough to keep her going?

"What can you tell me?"

"She was tall, thin, looked starved, and unnatural. I don't remember much. I didn't think of her as my possible twin then. Though, I wonder now." Her mom closed her eyes for a moment. "Tell me what you remember of Mistie."

Tricia reached for her mom's hands. "I'll make it a story so you can feel it so much better."

Her mom looked at her oldest daughter and smiled. "Can I rest on the couch while you tell the story?"

"Sure, Momma. Let's go in the other room."

Her mom rose slowly, and almost stumbled into the other room. She rested on the couch and covered her eyes with her hands.

"Mistie's first day was a few weeks after school started. For some reason, I had to go to the restroom shortly after arrival. I must have drank too much orange juice that morning."

Her mother smiled.

"As I came back to the room, there was someone standing in the doorway, not moving. She seemed shy, and awkward. Her outfit looked familiar. Perhaps she was lost?" Her mother touched her hand.

"I glanced back down the hallway, and for a second, it appeared never ending. There seemed to be thousands of open doors, instead of only ten." Her eyes misted and closed as she recited the day's events.

"Teachers talked behind many open doors. Kids rattled papers, preparing for math records. Not sure which multiplication we were singing that day." Tricia laughed.

"Tricia, please sit down for the quiz." The teacher's voice came from the far end of the room.

Silence filled the room as the kids turned to stare at the girl in the doorway.

"Tricia, please come in and sit down. No need to hide behind the door."

Ms. V had been the kindest teacher in the whole school.

The girl in the door shrunk back. She almost bumped into me. Tricia leaned against the couch.

"Sorry Ms. V, someone was blocking the door." I nudged the girl, and sauntered into the room.

There was an audible gasp from the entire room causing both of us to turn and stare at each other. From a few feet apart, we appeared the same height, hair color, skin tone, and even wore similar outfits. I had watched a movie about people switching places a few nights before, so I was intrigued by this person, I had to know her better.

Ms. V hurried to the new girl, and gently placed her hand on her shoulder. "Welcome to our class. Please come in and introduce yourself."

Mistie walked forward slowly, almost tripping. I followed from behind. Ms. V led her to the front of the room, and turned her around to face the front of the class. Her eyes closed instead of staring at the faces of my friends. I felt sorry for her.

"Tell us who you are?" Ms. V was firm in trying to make her speak.

"I'm Mistie. I'm new here. For a while anyway." Mistie pulled away as the class laughed.

"Mistie, where are you from?" Ms. V glared at the laughing kids.

What was the odd statement she had said? The first of dozens that school year. "Not far from here, or so they say."

Laughter died away. Everyone looked confused. She didn't talk like us.

The memory of that day brought back fears. What had caused her to be that way? I reached a hand out to Mistie. "Come sit beside me, there is an empty seat. What is your favorite color?"

I led her to the empty seat. The room buzzed around us. Ms. V let us chat while she gathered a set of books for Mistie to use. There hadn't been other new students who came part way through the day. Or part way through the year.

I looked forward to the cupcake birthday party. Imagine my surprise when I also found out it was Mistie's birthday as well. A perfect party. So soon after the arrival of a new friend. Who would soon be lost to the mists of time.

"Mom, you were wonderful at the party. You were so nice to the person who was Mistie's mom, though she seemed terrified of the children."

Her mom squeezed Tricia's hand.

Tricia closed her eyes and focused on the past.

"Multiplication table quiz time ended. You, and Mistie's mom, came in with plates of cupcakes. As the class sang 'Happy Birthday' to Mistie and me, we exchanged smiles, glad to share the center of attention."

"You remember it well." Her mom pulled a blanket around her shoulders. "It was a dark time."

"It was obvious to Mistie that her mother did not like you. She had no reason to know why. Mistie saw the dirty looks her mother gave this stranger who seemed somehow hauntingly familiar, though different."

"Really?" Her mom leaned toward her.

"She told me about those looks later. I never saw them. I was too happy sharing my birthday with all my friends."

"What else do you remember?"

"During recess, we played in the sandbox, and built dream homes of the future. We talked about everything imaginable, and unimaginable, and even made plans to wear the same outfits on the same days."

The next part of the story was a special secret.

"On our birthday, I asked her where she was born. She had been born in the same hospital as me. Only 30 minutes earlier!"

Her mom's face turned paler than before.

"Her lopsided castle seemed ready to tumble over into the gravel playground. I reached over to re-structure it to keep it level, and it tipped backwards into the sandbox."

The cat bounced up to her mom's lap.

"The year progressed and we spent every free moment at school together. Mistie came to trust me with the stories of her past, and dreams of the future. As the end of the year approached, Mistie knew it would soon be time for her to leave, and she was afraid. Of what, she never told me."

Tricia held her mom's hand as she remembered back to that time. It hurt to imagine what she must have gone through, then, and even now. "Momma, do you think she remembers me?"

Her mother looked at her for a second, and closed her eyes again. "I would think so. I think her memory would be as good as yours."

"I wonder if she is even alive." She squeezed her mom's hand hard.

"I hope so. Tell me about that last day of school." Her mom rubbed her nose.

"One day in early May, I think after the Mayday game, we were resting on the playground when Mistie said to me, 'Tricia, I know you have a full house, but can you keep something for me?'" It was her last request. Her only real request.

"Why? Won't you be back next year?"

The cat leaned over and licked her hair.

"Tears streamed down Mistie's face. 'No, we are moving far away again. I have no idea where to, or why. I know she doesn't like you, or like me to have friends. I was beaten again for calling you a friend. Here. It's valuable. Please hide it for me!' Mistie dropped the bundle in my lap, and ran to the steps and cried until

she couldn't cry anymore." The bundle. She had kept it safe and hidden for many years.

"I looked at the little bundle. It wasn't much. I sat on the steps beside Mistie and tried to comfort her. I looked at the pictures drawn and colored, and then placed them back in the box. The last two pieces were a stone, and a ring." The pictures had stayed pretty for years.

"The ring was old, and meant something to someone. After placing it carefully under the colored pages, I looked at the stone. It seemed a simple red sandstone, a perfect fit in my hand. Then, I turned it over, and saw the carved marks." What had she said they meant?

"At last, as Mistie's sobs quieted, I placed this back in the box and studied the cover, another picture, more a map than anything."

The cat purred, as if to make everything alright.

"Did you make these?" Where had she kept them hidden before she brought them to the school?

"No." Mistie choked from the sobs. "My best friend from my school two schools ago did. He was so special. I don't want to lose it, and I don't trust her. Please take care of it for me." What a scary thing to have said.

"You can always call or write." Did she ever try? If so, where were the letters?

"She won't let me. I will never forget you!" Mistie reached out to hug me, and I hugged her back. Her tears fell on my shoulder.

"I'll always remember you. If she don't let you call or write, I will find you again someday!" Had she looked? Had I looked? How?

A ball hit Mistie in the back. "Hey, come play, and quit crying," shouted one of the girls in the 4th grade. "Nothing to cry about on field day." If only they knew. Or, maybe better that they didn't.

Mistie picked up the softball and threw it back. "Please?" That whisper had meant so much more than the one word conveyed.

"I smiled, and then ran into the building with the memory box. I still have it too. I have to find it. I hid it somewhere safe."

"I'm sure you did." Her mom tucked some hair behind her ear.

"The last day of school was the worst. I can't think about it without crying."

The cat pushed her head against Tricia's hand.

"Ms. V sent the rest of the class out to the playground. The sound of silence hung like a thick fog throughout the room."

"Who was watching them?"

"Some other teacher." The teachers did tend to rely on each other in times of crisis.

I looked at the science table and picked up Mistie's bean sprout. "Here take it with you, it's yours." I hoped she would remember me by it. And maybe spark an answer to the unasked questions.

Mistie lowered her eyes as the tears fell. "I can't. Keep it. If I take it. My mother will kill it." She collapsed into the chair, sobs wracking her frail body. "Remember me." Why had her reactions been so strong?

"Ms. V and I walked up and we put our arms around Mistie. Momma, I don't remember much else about her."

Her mom's eyes were closed. "Did you both always get along?"

Tricia laughed long and hard. "Goodness no! Like any two sisters, we had our quarrels. One, I truly regret, and wish I could change."

She leaned her back against her mother's arm.

"We had this one girl who seemed more out of place than Mistie. I had never been friends with her, and didn't want Mistie around her, as I felt she was a bad influence."

Tricia looked back at her mom.

Her mom watched her.

Tricia's eyes brimmed with tears. "I wish I had spent that field trip with Mistie, and not the other girl. I regret it now."

Tricia sobbed at the thought of her lost sister. She felt her mother's hand on her back, trying to reassure as it always had, since she was little. "Did Mistie ever have anyone reassure her?" She could have ended up dead somewhere all alone, like so many young women who left the reservations.

"She had you for a school year."

Chapter 13

Mistie - Tina's Death - Age 19

Mistie was studying for an exam when the phone rang.

"Can you come over. I don't feel good."

The cord's shadow swung on the wall. "Who is this?"

"Tina." A heavy coughing rattled the line.

Mistie ran down three flights of stairs, snuck past the desk crew, and hurried to the building three dorms over. Again sneaking past the desk crew, she hurried to Tina's room.

The door was open. Tina was on the floor, covered up with a thick winter blanket.

"I took her temperature," Tina's roommate said. "It's not good."

"How bad?" Mistie looked up at the roommate.

Tina, the closet person she had to a friend.

"Bad. It's 105. Shake the thermometer down and take it again to be sure."

Mistie shook the thermometer. She grabbed the phone and campus directory.

Placing the thermometer into Tina's mouth, she checked her pulse as best she knew how. A weak pulse, her face was both pale and red. The phone rang in the campus health services building four times before it was answered.

"Hello."

"Hello, we have an emergency. My friend is sick. She can't sit or stand, and isn't responding." She pulled the thermometer out of Tina's mouth. "Her temperature's 105."

Silence on the other end.

"Are you there?"

The woman spoke slowly, "How much partying has she done?"

Mistie grimaced. "Partying? We don't have time to party! We are here to earn a college degree."

"Well, she probably drank too much alcohol. We can't help you. Even if we had a doctor on staff, which we don't, it would be two weeks before your friend could make an appointment. You couldn't make one for her."

Mistie was floored. "If she doesn't get help now, she won't be alive in two weeks!"

"School policy. We are here to teach you teens the facts of life. All doctors require appointments to be planned at least two weeks in advance. If you had paid attention in orientation class."

Mistie hung up on her. She called Justin, and begged him to hurry. She looked up at Tina's roommate. "Help me take her out the back door. We don't have time for questions at the desk."

They half dragged her down the hallway to a back door. By the time they got the door open, Justin was there with his car, and took Tina tenderly in his arms.

She didn't even open her eyes.

They took her to the nearest hospital, one that was used to seeing college students.

"Are you sure this is a good hospital?" Mistie asked.

Tina groaned as she flopped her arm across Mistie's face.

"No time to go anywhere else," Justin said.

"She seemed okay in class two days ago." Or had she. Maybe the local hospital wasn't as bad as the health services on campus.

"She has a bad cold. Take her back to her dorm room." The emergency room doctor said.

"Her fever is 105, she can't hold her head up, or see anything," Mistie said.

"She is a college student with a cold. She probably drank too much cold medicine. She appears hot because you wrapped her up in blankets. She will be fine."

Mistie stared at him in disbelief.

"Now, go and take the drunk girl back to her dorm before I call the cops to escort your back." He turned and stalked off.

"Justin, help me carry her. We aren't done." Mistie worried as they rushed Tina to the nearest hospital not in a college town. They flew as fast as his old car could move, trying to avoid any cops so they could make it in time.

Tina's fever seemed to drop. Her face paled even more. Her breathing slowed.

When they reached the emergency room door, Mistie and Justin screamed for help as they opened the car doors.

A nurse scurried out with a wheelchair. "Right this way. Follow me to the desk to give her intake information."

Justin parked the car.

A few minutes later, the nurse came out to Mistie and Justin in the waiting room. "I'm sorry, the pneumonia had gone too far into her lungs. An hour sooner, and we might could have saved her. We need to contact her family."

Mistie cried on Justin's shoulder. The injustice and inhumanity of the situation was frightening. "An hour ago we were at the local hospital. If I was sick, I'd be treated the same. I have to find healthcare now; in case I ever am sick."

The memorial service at the college lasted for hours, with nearly all the students who knew her, and many of the faculty in attendance. The story of her life, and the tragedy of her death were expressed all along the walls of the room. A collection box for pictures and souvenirs was set up for her family to remember her by. Tina's burial was in her hometown, over a thousand miles away. Few, if any, of the students could attend.

The politics professor, known as Mr. Debate, carefully read the story of the hospital visits.

"I wish the college health service had listened," Mistie said.

"This should never have happened." Tears rolled down Mr. Debate's cheeks. "We must work as a college to be sure that student's voices are heard, and their health is not ignored."

"The hospital here denied any wrong doing to her parents. They claim she could not have been ill. They have no record of even seeing her."

"What did the other hospital say?" Mr. Debate asked.

"Oh they knew, they called the hospital here, and have a faxed copy of their report and recommendations, or lack thereof."

Mr. Debate was silent for a few minutes. "I understand their reasoning. There are some students who will do things to themselves that are not serious, although they appear to be, and can cause lasting consequences. They didn't even attempt to treat her. It's almost as if they have given up, and have no faith in young adults."

"I have to do something. I can't stay here. I have no health insurance either. If I had to go to college healthcare, or their hospital, I wouldn't get any better treatment. I don't have time to work with my studies going on. Law enforcement is a challenging field. Part time jobs have no medical benefits."

"Give me some time. I plan to find a way to require health care for college students, real healthcare."

"The only way you can do that is to limit the time healthcare professionals can work for, or near a college. I'll be back someday. I simply can't stay now. I haven't studied or been to class in the two weeks since Tina was refused treatment."

"Mistie," Justin spoke up from beside her. "We can leave college for a bit. Go join the army and see where it leads us. At least we will have a roof over our heads, food, healthcare, and money to pay for college when we come back."

"Give me a few days to think about it." Mistie turned away. All of her work was for nothing. She couldn't focus to finish her classes. A failure, as her mom had said she would be.

Winter break was a few days away. She would have to make plans soon. "I'm not going to pass this semester. I am going to have to take off, and restart next semester. What will I do in the meantime?"

"Come stay with my family for break. They can find you somewhere to stay until you are ready to come back. They won't mind." Justin grinned.

"Won't that be odd in their eyes? You bringing home a homeless female friend?"

"No, they've always taken in my friends. Many would stay for weeks at a time. You will be no different in their eyes."

Mistie and Justin arrived at his parent's home. At first glance, it seemed to loom over the other houses. There were no trees in the yard, so it must be an illusion.

"Would you rather share an attic room with Justin's sisters, or have a basement room to yourself?" his mother asked.

Something about the words "basement room" nagged at the back of Mistie's mind. A cloud crossed over the cold November sunshine. "I'll share, if that's okay with his sisters."

"Great, it'll be a full sleepover again!" Cindy, his teen sister replied. "My college friends will be staying for vacation too. I'll go next year, and it'll be even more fun when you come back then!" She grabbed Mistie's bag and ran off up the front steps.

"Justin, perhaps you can show her the house and help her prepare for dinner."

"They don't dress up for dinner, do they?" Mistie asked. "I don't own many nice clothes."

"Not really. Basically, no visible holes or skin, clean enough we can't see the dirt under your nails kind of ready. I guess mom thinks you are a girly girl. Wait till she knows you."

"Maybe the restroom would be a good place to start." The cloud passed, and the sun shone through, bright as could be.

Justin finished showing her through the house before his mother called them all for dinner. It's not that the house was so big. Every room was alive with activity and had stories begging to be told by whoever was in the room, or by Justin himself.

"So, Mistie, tell us about yourself." Justin's father passed the main dish to his youngest daughter.

There wasn't much to say about herself, and she didn't want to speak of her family. Not here. They wouldn't understand. As she was about to say something, Justin's mother spoke up.

"Not now dear, let her eat first. She's nothing but skin and bones."

The banter around the table was light and fun as the visiting college friends and family talked about everything they could think of.

Mistie wished she could join in, though she felt she had nothing near as exciting to say. She also dreaded the moment when she would have to tell about her life. Really what was there to tell?

"You don't have to say anything. Say there is an occupant restriction where your mom lives, and any other family is vacationing too far away," Justin spoke quiet. Low enough to not be heard, not so low as to arouse suspicion.

As all the younger family members walked off, Mistie awkwardly rose to her feet. "Thank you for such a good meal. It's nice and fun here."

"Mistie, I know you didn't want to talk in front of everyone. We do need to know, does your family know you are here?" Justin's mother asked.

"No. Mom thinks we can stay on campus year round. She doesn't realize we have no place to go when classes are not in session." Well, it isn't a lie. It is the truth. Part of the truth.

Justin's mother looked at her closely.

Mistie was afraid she would know she was hiding something.

"We are going to watch a movie, then rest," Justin said. "The last few weeks have been difficult."

"Your Cousin Marty will be here tomorrow."

"He must have some fascinating stories to tell from his trip to Guatemala," his father said.

The following morning, the flurry of activity began at the first ray of daylight. Mistie's head pounded as people spoke over everyone else, and from room to room. She wandered outside after breakfast to find a place to breathe. The birds fluttered as if disturbed by the noisy home.

Before long, Justin followed. "All my siblings and their friends are gone. Come in for a few minutes, and visit with mom before Cousin Marty is here."

"My head hurt. The birds seemed to calm it."

"Mom can make some tea. Come on." Justin reached out his hand to help Mistie stand up.

Inside, his mom was busy with her shopping list for the week of vacation.

"Hi Mistie, I hope the girls didn't keep you up all night?"

"Only part of it. I think they settled down around 2am."

She laughed. "You can still go to the basement if you like. Are there any special foods you like, or don't like?"

Mistie stared at her, not intending to. "I try not to impose. Not really anything special. I don't think about it. I eat whatever I am given."

"Well, what do you like? Everyone gets at least one meal with something they like."

Mistie looked away at the kitchen sink, already shiny and clean after the breakfast for, how many? Was it ten or twenty people

here? What can I ask for? "I never ask for anything. I do like ham and potato soup though."

Justin's mom stared as she pretended to be working on her shopping list. "You never ask for anything? I wish my daughters only asked for one thing a day."

A smile spread across her face. "Justin is heating water. He must be planning tea."

"Yes mom. All the noise has given Mistie a headache."

"What, you don't have noise at college?"

"Not in the dorm I'm in."

Justin turned to the table and sat down with cups steaming from the hot water and a plate of tea bags to choose from.

"Mom, we need to talk. You know a little of what happened a few weeks ago."

"Yes. A close friend of yours died at college."

"It's a bit more complex than that. We both were caught up in the police investigation, the funeral, and memorial plans. We got way behind in classes. They suggested we take the rest of the semester off as withdrawn."

"Starting when?"

"Yesterday."

Justin's mom looked at him, and reached her hand out to Mistie. "So, do you have anywhere to go?"

Tears sprang to her eyes. Heat rose up her neck to her face. "No. I am not sure I can go back. Unless I can find a job that offers health insurance. I don't want the next death to be me." She fought to hold back the tears.

Justin's mom started to reach to hug her.

"No." He held his mom's arm back, and looked her in the eye.

She pulled away. "Well, you can stay here for a while. No one else needs to know for now. You probably don't have any money saved?"

"No." Mistie waited.

"What were you studying?"

"I was studying law enforcement. Some classes require a lot of work, and concentration. Something I don't have right now. Watching Tina die, watching those 'healthcare professionals' break the law, it was all too overwhelming."

The doorbell startled Mistie. She almost jumped out of the chair.

No one laughed.

Justin's mom hurried to the door.

"Cousin Marty, it's so good to see you," Justin said.

The new person walked into the room.

"What no coffee for me?" he asked.

"We can make you some. We didn't want it cold by the time you got here," Justin's mom said. "Tell us about some of your adventures. We could use some cheering up."

"Cheering up? From what?"

"A close friend at college died because the college healthcare and hospital refused her medical care," Justin said.

He sat down next to Justin, glanced at Mistie, before he turned his attention entirely to Justin. "Well, your friend here could use some chocolate with her tea. As for your story, it sounds too sad for a festive holiday. Where shall I begin?"

Justin's mom sat back down after starting the coffee pot. "What exciting things did you see in Guatemala?"

"I was there to study their disaster preparedness plans. Of course, I managed to convince them that not only did I need to study current plans, but also ancient plans."

Mistie leaned forward. "How did you do that?"

"What convince them, or study them?" His eyes twinkled. "I have always been interested in archeology, so I decided it would be helpful to visit some ancient Mayan settlements to see how they were prepared for natural disasters."

"What did you find?" Mistie asked.

"Now, now. I can't tell you that. It's top secret information. I can say, I didn't learn as much as I had hoped. We will have to study satellite images too, to see where the ancient coastlines lay to verify which settlements were on coastlines and feared hurricanes and tsunamis."

"That sounds like exciting work. I didn't know the army did that," Mistie said.

"You can do just about anything. Justin here could have them to pay for his medical school, if he would join. What could you do?"

"I was studying law enforcement. They do match, somewhat."

"Oh, make it more fun than plain law enforcement. How about law enforcement in the throes of a major natural, or manmade disaster? Could you do that?"

"I doubt they would take a woman for that."

"Sure, there are plenty of women in the army now. I'll get my coffee, and we can talk about it more if you like."

Mistie thought about it while Justin and his mom talked. It might not be so bad, a roof over her head, food, medical care, a job, an education. However, what was that sick feeling in the pit of her stomach about? Maybe those eggs and fried ham were too greasy.

Chapter 14

Liza and Cal meet Casey and Kelly - Forever Young - Year 19

The green screen blinked.

It blinked again, as if waiting on something.

An error message appeared.

Liza groaned. "This computer can't even handle the data we are putting in. It errors out."

"The data simply doesn't fit known parameters for twin studies. I have been looking at a few studies from our rivals though." Cal sipped his coffee.

Liza looked across to Cal. "Our rivals? That's unheard of. Merlish won't like that."

Cal leaned back to look at Liza. "He ordered it. These are child abuse survivor's studies. All on adults, of course. Possibly relevant. It is something to look at."

"What are you thinking? What happened to these girls? The mothers never married. The girls tell me nothing."

He leaned forward and lifted the files he had been reviewing. "We have no idea. I have new categories to add to your report files. Not until the visit with Kelly and Casey though."

Heavy thudding footsteps echoed through the mostly empty warehouse. Merlish walked into view.

"Cal, Liza, we have some new information. Lottie is pregnant as well. Her school wants her to her have an abortion."

"She can't," Cal said. "At least not without our finding out who the father is."

"Lottie, like Tammy, has no idea. They have studied sex in high school, and can tell the nurse the process, but don't remember ever doing it. At least Lottie doesn't. She describes some of the same odd things that Tammy and Ginny did."

Liza struggled through the words. "Merlish, what do we really know?"

"What do we know? Nothing! We know these girls are the most messed up of any girls we've studied. Most years, we have been

able to pass off the odd quirks. Last year, it was questionable. This year," Merlish raised his fist and waved it in the air, letting it fall back to hit his leg. "If I find out what I fear, those girls were all wronged, and the culprits will never be able to suffer a fraction of what the girls have. The legal system will barely tap their fingers, not give true justice. If there is any such thing."

Merlish turned and hobbled out of the room.

The next morning, Liza parked at the high school where Kelly and Casey attended. She looked up at the building, one of the smaller high schools she had visited.

"I'm almost afraid of what we will find here," she said.

"Me too." Cal said. "Put me in the corner, if you can, and don't let them close to me."

Liza looked over at him and grinned. "What you don't like seventeen and eighteen-year-old girls?"

"Not like Tammy. I prefer them at least ten feet away, thank you. Quiet, and not looking at me."

Laughing, they got out of the car and walked towards the building.

Liza and Cal sat down.

Casey was ushered into the room.

A woman came with her. "Casey has asked me to stay because she heard you had a male friend with you."

Cal nodded from his seat in a corner.

Liza blocked access to his seat.

"Bring in another chair then," Liza said. "Casey, how are you?"

Casey stared at her chest.

When the lady came back with a chair and sat beside Casey, she glanced up. "I'm worried about Sissy."

Cal and Liza exchanged looks.

"How so?"

"Why?"

Casey played with the frayed edge of her jacket. "She's different somehow. I feel left behind."

Liza leaned forward to catch Casey's eye. "How left behind?"

Casey covered her mouth with her hand as a tear streamed down her cheek. "People pay attention to her, but not to me."

Liza looked at Cal again, unsure what to say or do.

"Well, we are here to pay attention to you. What do you want, or need?"

Casey tried to speak through the sobs.

The woman beside her handed her tissues.

"Don't know."

Liza watched as long as she could bare it. "Casey, you used to tell me about," she glanced at her notes. "The monkey people. Any new monkey people stories?"

"No. They haven't been here in a while. They will be back soon, momma said."

Cal leaned forward. "Who are the monkey people? Where do they come from?"

Casey smiled. A trance like state came over her face. "The monkey people are young people trapped in the bodies of old people. They come and dance in front of us, and make us dance with them. I don't like to dance."

Cal glanced at Liza.

"Casey, how is your mom?"

"Momma sleeps all the time. We rarely see her. We go home, and stay quiet so as not to wake her. Some days, the monkey people come. She sleeps even more then."

The door opened, and Kelly walked into the room. She glared at Casey.

Casey glared back. "I guess my turn is over. Have a good year." She stood up and ran out of the room.

Kelly sat down slowly, a little blush on her face.

Was it natural, or not?

"Hi Kelly, this is Cal, my friend. How are you?"

Kelly glanced at Cal. "He's okay. He will do. I'm here. I do what I am told. I wish I could do other things. Don't know what."

Liza couldn't understand the sister's reactions. Kelly acted more like Mistie. Not enough. Something nagged at her. "What are your plans for the rest of the year?"

Kelly leaned forward, watching Cal closely. "To do what I am told. What do you want me to do?"

Cal squirmed, afraid of this teen.

"Kelly, look at me," Liza said.

Kelly eventually looked at her, then back at her lap.

"Sorry, trying to figure out what you are expecting. Sometimes I can. I am usually better at that than my sister."

Liza glanced at Cal, hoping he would stay quiet.

He raised his hand half an inch as if to shy away.

"Kelly, tell me about you. What has happened since we last talked?"

Kelly looked up at her, and twirled her hair. "Well, the boys like me more, a lot more. Not sure why. Momma worked hard to make us gain some weight in the last year. She felt it was important. Not sure how her friends will like it though."

"Her friends?" Liza asked.

"Yes, they are due in to visit in a few weeks. Nothing we ever do makes them happy. I asked Momma why they still come."

"And she said?"

Kelly smiled. "She said they still like us. Even if they complain about us every minute they are there."

"What do they complain about?"

Kelly tapped her fingers on her knee. "We are too noisy, play too much, talk too much, study too much, watch too much TV, whatever. No matter what we do, it's always too much. They prefer us to sleep when they are there so they can visit Momma. Though she doesn't understand that, we do."

A bell rang in the building.

Kelly jumped up and ran out of the room.

The woman beside her stirred. "As a teacher here, I worry about these two girls. They say odd things sometimes."

"We know." Cal said. "We are working to figure out what is going on. It takes too much time."

The woman looked at him. "Why did you come with Liza this time?"

Cal watched her as she leaned forward. "To have proof that it wasn't Liza seeing and hearing things that may, or may not, be the full story. It has been scary for me too."

"I don't want these girls hurt. I fear it is too late." The woman said.

"We are trying. Please keep close to them, and help them. Let us know where they go." Cal closed his eyes.

She nodded, stood slowly, and walked out of the room.

Liza gathered her papers. "Well, off to the computer to input more data. No idea how this will turn out."

"It wasn't this wild last year?"

"No Cal, not so bad." She turned to face him before getting up. "I hope we aren't too late."

As he stood, he whispered, "Only eighteen years too late I think."

Chapter 15

Tricia Finds Treasures - Age 19

The few boxes left made the attic startlingly bare. A few months before, it had been a room full of activity. Boxes were moved down to Gramma's bedside, labeled, and moved back up. Now, all the labeled boxes were gone. A few remained, one for each of the three children, and one for the missing sisters.

Tricia walked carefully to the box labeled hers. She sorted through childhood pictures and elementary school report cards. The report card with the name and address of the school she and Mistie had both gone too was nestled on top. Her last private school before homeschooling began after they moved to Gramma's. The hours passed slowly, and calmly as she searched through the box of memories. There was an air of an awareness that there was always room for one more in the family pictures. Space had always been left for the ghostly missing figures.

She reached the bottom. "It's not here. It's not in my room either." Tears filled her eyes, as she lowered her face to her hands.

A hand touched her back. "It's here, whatever it is. It isn't gone."

Tricia looked up.

Quin sat beside her.

"What are you searching for?"

"Mistie's things. A shoebox with drawings, a stone, and a ring."

Quin took her hand and stood up. "I think I know where it is."

"Could it be in the sister's box?"

Quin laughed. "No, too valuable for that. Come see what I found."

Tricia wiped away her tears and followed her brother down the stairs.

Quin led her back to the room that had been her Gramma's. The safe was open, and papers were strewn everywhere. He was sorting those, to determine what should be kept, and what to let go of.

Tricia did not see what she was looking for scattered across Gramma's bed, so ran to the safe. Sure enough, there in the back corner was the box. Far more worn than she remembered.

As she pulled it out, the paper map crumbled at the corners. Carefully, she sat it on the floor in front of her. She opened the top cover. There were the pictures she remembered only vaguely. There was the carved stone, and a strange jewelry box.

Tricia grabbed the box, and opened it, to see the ring. The ring was all nice and clean. She pulled it out to look it over, and saw a family name underneath the stone.

"Wow, it's been cleaned. How did it end up here?"

Quin laughed. "Gramma always knew what was important. I guess she had no idea why you thought this was valuable to keep."

He pointed to the box and drawings. "She did see value in the ring though. So, she cleaned it and put it all away safe for you someday. Or, maybe you asked her to keep it safe."

Tricia held the ring tightly to her chest. "Perhaps. I don't remember. That was not a good time. I missed my best friend. We moved back here. All kinds of things were going on."

"Did you find it?"

Mom leaned on the doorframe.

"Yes. Isn't it beautiful?"

She took the ring from Tricia. "Who does it really belong to?"

"No idea, Momma. I'll have to research that as well. At least I found the name of the school she and I went to."

"Good. That's a start."

"I'll contact them to see if they still exist. I want to talk to our teacher."

Quin picked up the drawings. "Whoever drew these had great promise as an artist."

Tricia smiled. "Yes, it was Mistie's first boyfriend. He was forced to move across the country when her mom found out about him."

Mom gasped, and held the ring closer to her body.

Tricia glanced up at her. "Momma?"

Quin reached for the page in her hand. "Here, let's put all of this back in the safe."

Momma handed the ring to her son. She walked out of the room. Her face was pale, as if she had seen a ghost.

Tricia tried to go after her.

Quin reached out a hand to stop her. "No, be quiet a minute more."

They waited until they heard the back door close.

He looked at her face, and let his hands drop. "There was an argument. Her mom threatened something on Momma and Daddy. I overheard part of the conversation. We came here because of it. I promised to never say a word."

Tricia sat back down.

"It matters now. You need to know. Apparently, the only way she wouldn't do whatever it was, was if we left town. So, we did."

"She left then too!"

Quin placed the box back in the safe. "Yes, the woman wanted to be sure there was no way for you to find Mistie, or Mistie to find you. Now, it's up to you. You have to."

"I'll go see what I can find. It will not be easy."

Tricia searched for more information and phone numbers for the school they had both attended. Knowing now, that they had been run out of town, for merely being friends was frightening.

"I hope I never meet the woman who did this." She muttered as she made phone calls and jotted notes.

At last, she reached the correct phone number for the school. It existed.

"Please, may I come for a visit, and how soon?"

"If you don't have a current child here, you needn't bother. In two months, our doors will close permanently." The lady on the other end said.

"I can be there in two days. I have to find my old school records, and find a former teacher. Please. It's important for my job." Tricia let the desperation show in her voice as she tapped pencils. She felt like throwing something, anything.

The woman on the other end sighed. "Records can be obtained without coming here."

"No! I have to meet the teacher who knew us. Please?"

"Okay, you may come. When did you go to school here? What is your name?"

Tricia gave her the information. Then she almost slammed the phone down. She ran to pack for the journey.

She grabbed her bags to leave in the morning.

Her brother showed up beside her. "Wait. I'm going with you."

"I'm ready to go now."

He handed her a bowl. "Not without breakfast. Don't worry, I'm packed too, you can't drive that far alone, you wouldn't be able to move when you get there. Besides, I promised Momma."

Tricia sat the bowl down, and ran in search of her mother to wish her a good week without two of her children.

"Come back soon with news. I'll be at a meeting today."

Two days later, Tricia and Quin drove up to what had once been a large, imposing building, bursting at the seams with students. They walked in through the tall doors. Emptiness, and boarded up doors to classrooms greeted them. The office was piled with boxes full of files, and tissues.

Tricia pushed through the door in a hurry. She didn't hear it close behind her.

The woman at the counter patted her eyes. "Hello, who are you? We are packing to leave in a few weeks."

"Hi, I'm Tricia. I came to see my records, and find my teacher, Ms. V."

The woman nodded and waved her hand to a small table on the right with a file and a few papers on it.

Tricia rushed over to look at them. There was her file. However, Mistie's wasn't beside hers.

"Ms. V will be here in half an hour." The lady at the desk said. "The copy machine is over there. Normally, it'd be 10 cents a page to copy."

Tricia hesitated. She grabbed the file to her chest and walked in front of the lady again. "Can I see the box this came from? It seems some pages are missing."

"No. I can't do that. That is all we have."

Tricia nodded. She walked over to the copier, and copied a few pages. She glanced up at Quin as he walked in.

Quin watched a moment, before he walked up to the lady. "Is there anything I can do to help you with all these boxes?"

The woman looked up to see the strong young man. "Yes, those over there need to go in storage in the back room until the truck comes to pick them up. Turn on that light before you carry them, as no one is back there. Keep the dates in order if you can."

"Sure." Quin turned on the light and deliberately reached for a box his sister did not point to. He carried a few more boxes. "I'm going to put those in order now. They have been shuffled around."

He picked up the box his sister had indicated and walked out of sight.

The woman smiled as Tricia sat down to look at her treasures.

The door opened and a woman past middle age walked in. She looked right at Tricia. "Hi, which twin are you today?"

Tricia smiled, and reached out her hand, like when she was a child. "Let's go sit on the playground, please?"

"They said Tricia was coming. I am glad to see you." Ms. V took her hand.

They walked down the long empty hallway. "I have been gone a few years. This place is almost deserted now. I feel bad for those who remained, and hope they can find a place to go next year."

Tricia didn't pay much attention as she talked. As soon as they reached the playground doors, she ran through, and outside to her favorite step. It was crumbled, much as the rest of the building.

Ms. V sat down.

Tricia looked around at the abandoned play area.

"What did you come for? It wasn't to see an old, forgotten teacher."

Tricia sat down. "I'd gladly drive to see you, though a two-day trip is a bit much."

Ms. V laughed.

Tricia reached out and grabbed her hand. "I need your help. I have to find Mistie. We have reason to believe she really is my twin sister. Can you help me find her?"

Ms. V looked out over the wasteland of a playground. "I wish I could. They covered their tracks so well. I worried about her, and even you for years. I knew you would be okay. Her, though."

Her voice broke down, and a tear twinkled in her eye.

"It's usually easy to obtain records of the school's students came from. However, it isn't always reciprocal. We often don't keep

records of where they go. We may receive a letter asking for their records, and unless we kept that envelope and request, there is no proof of where she went. It could take years to track her down, even to the next school."

Tricia stared out at the broken sandbox, almost seeing Mistie's sandcastle fall backwards once again.

"There isn't much hope is there? We have no idea where to start. Is she even alive?"

"You didn't come alone did you?"

"No, my brother is with me."

"Let's hope he finds a clue." Ms. V reached into her pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. "Here is my address and phone number if you find her." Ms. V stood up and walked towards the door.

"Can you remember anything that can help me?"

"Not really. I wish I could. Only that they were moving far way. No idea what state even. Maybe a different country. I am sorry." The door closed softly behind her.

Tricia grasped the paper in her hands without looking at it.

The door opened again. Tricia looked up to see if Ms. V had come back.

Quin bounced down the stairs. "I found her file and copied it in the back room. I simply added her papers to yours as I walked through. The woman never noticed; she was talking to your teacher."

He reached out to take her hand. "Come on big sis, we have to go home."

Tricia reached up and grabbed the pages.

They raced to the car before anyone could catch them.

Chapter 16

Mistie applies to join the Army - Age 19

Mistie watched the city pass around her.

Justin drove to the recruiter.

The ten-minute drive, stretched onward. They passed each building, and were caught by every stoplight in the five-mile stretch.

Mistie didn't know much about the military. Some hazy something, out of sight in her mind she couldn't grasp when she thought about what she was doing. It scared her. As if she were preparing to dig her own grave. Too morbid a thought. Staying in college without healthcare would be closer to digging her own grave.

Mistie stepped out of the car and followed Justin into the sparse office.

"Hello, young people, how can we help you today?"

"We are here to join the army, if we can pass the tests." Justin said.

"You can both sign up here, but you will be sent to separate training. Until you have completed all training there is no chance you will be able to be together."

"As long as we can call occasionally, that will be okay. We are friends. Hopefully lifelong friends," Mistie said.

They began the paperwork and medical trail that would lead them to army training.

The next few weeks were frantic with preparations. Justin's mom was willing to keep her few belongings in storage in her basement. He studied to pass the test to send him into medical training after basic training. She studied little, and felt out of sorts. The distance grew between them.

"I'm not sure what I am feeling, it's odd," Mistie said. "When he left today, I felt empty. More alone than I remember feeling."

Justin's mom curled her hands around her teacup. "How long will it be before you will be able to see Justin again?"

"Maybe six months, maybe a year. Or, vacations. If we have them at the same time."

"You can always visit here when you have some time off. Don't feel any pressure. You have a place to come home to."

"Thank you. No one else has ever wanted me."

Five six-week old kittens ran across the floor, knocking over food and water bowls.

"Children always need a home. Even adult children need a place to call home where they can rest their worries and cares at the door." Justin's mom offered her more hot water.

"Thanks."

Hot water trickled through the tea bag, leaving a stream of steam to twirl between them.

The following day, Justin's mom dropped Mistie off at the registration place with several other women who were joining the army. She walked into the bustling building. The others all appeared to have multiple bags overflowing with clothes, makeup, hygiene items, books, and other personal items. It made her school backpack look pathetic.

"Name please?"

"Mistie Jolin." Something about his look, was that surprise, shock, disgust, what?

"Here is your list, and book. In this book, you will find everything you will learn in basic training. Take this list, and empty anything on it into a box over there, these items are prohibited in basic training. Some are prohibited on any army base. This second list is the list of items you need to have. Be sure you have them. If you don't have them in the next twenty minutes, you will buy them later, during registration week."

Mistie went to an empty table. The lists were simple enough. Prohibited items: knives, makeup, civilian clothes (one outfit only), jewelry, perfume, any fragranced items. Required items: suitable protective underclothes, socks, and unfragranced personal hygiene items. Your personal space will be no more than 3 inches deep, and six inches wide. If it can't fit in there, and isn't on this list, send it home now.

Mistie looked up as the noise escalated around her.

Some of the other young women attempted to force their personal items to fit in the shoeboxes provided for personal space testing. The numbers of clothes some of these women had packed was astounding. Mistie looked in her own bag. She had brought one nice sweater as winter was coming on. Other than that, only a simple change of clothes. Her personal items were only some paper and pens, with a few pictures, and good luck charms. It would hardly fill half the shoebox.

"Soldier, are you ready?" The man stared over her head.

"Yes sir. The training book doesn't count as part of our personal item's space, does it?" The book alone was two inches high.

The other women hushed and stared at her with mouths agape.

"I want to be able to keep a stationary set my friend's mom gave me at parting today."

"No, the book has its own place. Your lockers will be organized according to regulations. You will be expected to keep some stationary, although no one will check for it. Everyone, go to the doors to begin the trip."

Mistie added the book and papers to her bag with nothing left behind on the table. Behind her, tables overflowed with items left for worried parents to pick up as their frustrated daughters left for training.

Registration camp passed in a blur. Boot camp took a little longer with all the classes and constantly changing schedules.

Mistie had no time to worry. The sergeant abuse of soldiers bothered her. No one seemed to notice, because they thought it was normal. They claimed it built character. What Mistie saw was a weakening of character. She saw that these women would do anything to please the men who were in charge. That can't be a good thing. It kept nagging at the back of her mind, sometimes making her slow to respond to orders.

One day, while standing in line waiting for orders, Mistie watched a new group of recruits being yelled out by their personal trainer.

"Soldier, are you listening?"

Mistie jumped, and turned to look at the officer who had appeared in front of her. "No sir. I was distracted."

"After the hike today, you will have cleaning duty for two hours then." He turned and stalked off yelling orders to the short line of women as if they were across the road and heavy traffic were between them.

Mistie groaned silently. I'll miss Justin's call tonight. I'll have to email as soon as I can find an empty computer.

As they hiked down the trail, the other women watched her. One held up her hand to stop Mistie. She thought they had given up. She rarely spoke back, unless necessary. Usually the sergeants appreciated this, and were less hard on her, furthering the separation between her and the other women, who were often unnecessarily noisy.

Summer came, and she had a week off to be herself. Justin's mom asked her to come visit, so she made the trip back to his town. As she stepped off the plane, his mom met her with open arms.

"Mistie, it's good to see you. Everyone else is out of town, so you will have plenty of time for peace and quiet. I thought we could visit some, and maybe go to a nearby farm for a day if you like. Please, call me Emma."

"Sounds good." Mistie was a bit bewildered by the excitement in her friend's mother's voice.

A wonderful week without distractions.

As the two women visited, Mistie began to accept her more as a friend. The trip to the farm had been enlightening and entertaining. She had enjoyed the working farm presentation. The horse ride to the creek and picnic had left her with time to dream, at least subconsciously, as she couldn't remember her thoughts. All of the strangers, friends for an afternoon, enjoyed the picnic.

What she enjoyed most, were the evening visits with cookies and teacups at their sides. As they sat and talked about the future, Mistie realized she didn't really have any dreams. At least, not other than to have a job, a home, and to live. Emma didn't bring up Mistie's past, though she didn't prevent her from talking about it either.

She realized she had spent more time talking with her friend's mother about her hopes, dreams, and daily thoughts than she ever

had with her own mother. It simply wasn't possible with her own mother. You never knew when, or what, might make her explode.

"Where do you go from here?" Emma asked.

"I'll go to California, to train in foreign languages. Then, I may have a chance to travel."

"You can always come back here." Emma smiled as she reached to touch Mistie's hand.

"I hope so. I've enjoyed my visit."

Mistie's trip to the airport that night nearly brought her to tears. She leaned back in the seat to watch the countryside slip away. Strands of thoughts haunted her.

Chapter 17

Cal and Merlish meet Mistie - Forever Young - Year 21

Cal glanced from the sheets in his hands, to the computer screen in front of his face. He grabbed piles of folders, and reviewed their contents, constantly comparing them to the screen.

Liza watched, the uncertainty growing. "What do you see in the words and numbers?"

Cal ignored her and picked up the phone. It was the original red rotary phone, previously used only for emergencies. Now, it was retired to normal work, as all the other phones had quit working due to spilled coffee and food.

"Sure I can hold," Cal said. A few minutes passed. He drummed his fingers on the desk, and looked back at Liza.

"Yes." Cal sat upright, and grabbed the nearest paper. "We seem to have an issue. You are sure of these reports you sent us?"

Cal shuffled papers. "Okay, we are comparing them to some of ours. We have an odd case here. One study that makes no sense, and matches none that appear, on the surface, that it should match."

He listened for a few minutes. "Okay. Can I ask one question?" Cal waited.

"Did you ever have a gentleman about twenty years ago come with a young woman, young enough to be his daughter, and demand a twin study?"

Cal listened and tapped his pencil. "Thank you. I didn't think you would remember. Let me know if you find anything. I appreciate all of your help."

Liza jumped off the desk she was sitting on. "Why didn't you ask for the case by the man's name?"

"What if he used a different name?"

He placed his hand on the files as he looked at her. "This man was crafty. Who knows how many names he may have used. Or how many young women."

"Who did choose the mothers?" Liza tapped the files.

"The man who designed the twin study chose them all. He had picked them out before he even spoke to Merlish."

Liza picked up a file beside her and glanced at it, not seeing the name. "So is it over now? Am I done? I don't want to be. This project has become too painful to me. Too close, and too far away."

"We know it has. If you choose to leave now, we understand. Only, you must stay in contact. When we take this case to court, as I'm sure we will, we will need your witness testimony."

"I was afraid of that. Well, if this is mostly goodbye, I'll say it and go see Merlish before I leave." Liza picked up her bag and walked toward the office near the warehouse door.

Cal watched the screen crunching numbers and variables until Merlish walked slowly up. "What do you think?"

Merlish sat on the same desk recently vacated by Liza. "I think we are in trouble. Serious trouble. Can't prove it. We have to be ready to prove our innocence, and protect these young women. Where do you recommend we start?"

Cal looked at his sheet. In the last two years, three of the now women had given birth, a few had worked a few months, then stopped. A fourth was now pregnant. One though, and only one was doing something. She was on the move.

"I suggest we talk to Mistie, if we can find her. She joined the military, and shouldn't be too difficult to find, if they will let us speak with her."

"I am way too old for this. You have no idea how much I now wish I had never gone along with this study idea." Merlish shifted on the desk.

Cal glanced back at the screen. He tried to match variables and numbers. "I know. We all are. We are in it now though. This Mistie. She had enough strength to stand up to Liza, and the office staff at her high school. She made it through Army basic training. Maybe she can help us."

A few days, and many phone calls on the staticky rotary phone later, and Mistie had been located. At last, Cal geared up for the phone conversation that might bring Mistie to visit them.

The phone rang, loud and long down the mostly empty warehouse.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is this Calvin?"

"Yes, are you Mistie?"

"Yes. What information do you want?"

"Mistie, please call me Cal. Would it be possible for you to take a day or two off to come here so we could talk?"

"No, I can't leave. We do have a three-day weekend coming up. I could perhaps arrange to meet you on base, or off."

"I will have a letter sent to you with specifics when I arrange something, okay?" Afraid she couldn't, or wouldn't leave, Cal had already arranged the meeting for two weeks from today in a tiny on base meeting room.

"Sure. Talk to you later." Mistie hung the phone up, none too gently.

Two weeks later, Cal and Merlish sat in the tiny room, waiting on Mistie to arrive.

Cal fidgeted with a pencil as she walked in the door in uniform.

"Hi. They said you would be here." Mistie sat down.

"Mistie? This is the first time we have met." Cal looked at her, similar to, though so different from the four girls he had seen, or the pictures of the other six girls he had not met.

"I am guessing you took over for whatever Liza was doing. Haven't seen her in a while."

"No, she is doing something else these days."

"Are you studying me too?"

Merlish reached his hand forward. "Hi, I'm Merlish. It's my fault we are all in this mess. We need your help to escape."

Mistie stared at his hand. "What can I do? I have told my story every year, as far back as I can remember."

Merlish and Cal looked at each other.

"We need a couple of more pieces of information. Then, we need help to find who is responsible for a possible crime against young women."

Mistie's eyes opened wide.

Cal reached for one folder. "Did your mom have any friends?"

Mistie shook her head.

"None?" Merlish asked.

"No. She spoke to no one if she could avoid it."

"Did she speak to anyone?"

"Only her parents."

Cal and Merlish drew a deep breath.

"Can you describe them?" Cal twirled a pencil.

"They are hard to describe. They are odd really. I don't talk to them." Mistie's eyes receded as her voice lowered.

Cal made a note on the page in front of him. He reached into the folder below and pulled out a package.

"Here Mistie, tell me if you recognize any of these."

Mistie looked through the pile. The photos were unlabeled on the front. As she looked through them, one caught her. "Looks familiar, though I can't place her."

Cal took the picture, turned it over, made note of the name on the back, and waited.

Mistie sorted through a few more, and handed two others over as well. With only a few photos left to go, she drew in a deep breath of air. "I remember her. She was in my last high school. She had a baby, and I don't think she graduated."

She handed the picture to Cal who recognized Tammy, and wrote her name down, circling it.

Mistie stared at the last two photographs. Her hands shook.

"I know them. They are my mother's parents. How did you get their pictures? They look younger here." Her voice shook almost as much as her hands, as she held the photos. She started to crumble the picture.

"Here, let me have that." Cal took the photo.

Mistie pushed the rest of the pictures over to him. She had tears in her eyes.

Cal watched her and waited. "We don't know what to say."

She lowered her head. Tears interrupted speech. "Please, tell me what is going on. Why am I being followed?"

Merlish shuffled the photos into an envelope. "We have to go against regulations and tell you. You are part of a twin study. A study gone terribly wrong. According to our estimates, you are the only one of eleven girls who turned out almost normal."

Mistie laughed, an odd, high-pitched laugh. "I'm far from normal."

Cal reached his hand forward. "We need your help. These people may be dangerous. What do you know that can help us?"

Mistie thought for a few minutes. "Nothing. Most of my childhood is blocked. I don't have many pictures or memories. I hope you can help these girls. I guess they are women now as well."

Merlish nodded. "Is there anything you can tell us?"

"I wish I could. I have to go now." She stood up to leave. One glance back, and she was gone.

Cal gathered his folders together. "Legally, we have done all we can."

Merlish nodded silently.

An officer walked in the door. She closed it behind her. "Hello. Please sit down. I have a few words to say."

Merlish and Cal glanced at each other and sat back down.

Merlish tapped his pencil.

"I'm in security," she said. "I see and hear a lot. Mistie doesn't remember my name. I was part of the group she left from her friend's hometown with."

She looked across the table at them. "She doesn't remember things she doesn't think will matter in time. Odd, isn't it? Most people try to remember everyone they meet." She stopped to draw her breath.

"You aren't here to hurt her, are you?" The woman said.

Merlish and Cal shook their heads.

The officer watched their faces. "On that day we all left for basic training, I noticed how the man reacted when she gave her name. I thought her name was unique. Not so much now. Many of us have seen shadows that seem to follow her. In fact, Joan and I are trying our best to find out who the shadows are, and why they follow her. Please don't hurt her."

She looked at them one more time. She stood up and walked out the door. Her rigid uniform almost hid the shaking of her hands.

As Merlish and Cal walked out of the building to their rental car, they thought they noticed Mistie watching them. The person watching was partially hidden by a building. The face looked their way.

"Who are they, and why?" Merlish said.

"More questions than answers at this point." Cal turned the ignition.

Chapter 18

Tricia and Quin's search for Mistie - Age 19

Quin pulled into the restaurant parking lot.

Tricia glanced over at him as he parked. "You know, stealing and copying those papers is illegal, most likely."

"I'm under eighteen, so it won't hurt me. Anyway, we are practicing to be teen detectives, we will retire after this case."

Tricia laughed. "I guess Mistie won't mind."

Quin reached for the door handle. "We'll ask her when we find her. I think she wants to be found. I think Ms. V wants her found. What's on that paper she handed you anyway?"

Tricia had forgotten the slip. The slip stuck to the top of her and Mistie's school files. "I've been too excited to look."

"I'll buy us some burgers and fries. We can eat out here. Be back in a minute."

Tricia opened the tiny slip Ms. V had handed her.

The slip contained in tiny print Ms. V's full name, address, and phone number at the top. However, further down was another address, with the notation "check out." Below that were the names of three schools. Not much to go on. The phone numbers might not even work anymore. The area code wasn't local. At least it was only three calls. They shouldn't cost too much, if she wasn't kept on hold. Mot that cost mattered. Except, the money would better be spent on finding Mistie.

Quin opened the door, and handed her a lunch. He sat down and started eating, waiting on her.

Tricia continued to go through Mistie's papers, careful not to drop any food on them. Nothing much was there. Mistie's report card, and immunization records. There was record of previous report cards and schools with question marks, as if the office staff didn't believe they were accurate.

Tricia reached for the last page, handwritten by the teacher. Notes, precious notes, in tiny script. "I can barely make out the words."

She recognized a pattern. Dates, marks, tags. "Mistie was quiet, sullen, when Tricia was not there. Monday - barley spoke. Tuesday - Tricia absent, Mistie was alone and afraid. Wednesday - was unsure. Friday - was scared. Monday - happy as a lark." The page contained notes for almost the whole eight months Mistie had been enrolled.

"I wonder if Mistie was the only one she kept such careful records of?"

Quin laughed. "We will never know. Is there anything that can help us?"

"I can't find it. We may need help, but we will find her."

Quin started the car.

Tricia continued reading.

A few days later, Tricia sat surrounded by phone books, the computer in the corner, not even on. Piles of paper and files stacked, ready to tumble down. Two cordless phones tossed aside, batteries dead, and one corded phone on a twenty-foot wire at her feet.

Quin peeked in the door. "Any progress?"

"I think I need a break." She rubbed her head.

Quin looked around the room. "What have you found?"

"I have been able to trace back, and verify the schools she went to before she met me. Other than that, no luck. There must be a hundred schools with this name in the country." She slammed the pages in her hand down.

Tears streamed down her cheek. "It seems hopeless. Even if I find the right school, they have all told me they cannot give me the information we need."

"There are other ways we can find her than the schools. There have to be. Come on and let's eat."

Over a plate of fried zucchini, Tricia cheered up. "I wish the computer were more useful. I can play games, or store data at least. Only a few people have email. Chat rooms, I don't know if the people are for real or not."

"Someday, it'll all be there. Someday, if we don't find her before then, we will be able to on the computer."

"I hope so. I hope it's not too late already."

Quin placed his fork on his empty plate and reached a hand to his sister. "It's not. No matter what, we will find her, alive, dead, or in a hospital."

Tricia looked up into his face. "You don't think she is hurt, do you? Or drugged up, or even, pregnant?"

Quin steadied his hand on her arm. "We can only hope not. We know her life has been ugly. Remember, she will be strong, like you. She will survive."

Mom spoke behind them. "We don't know for sure if she is fraternal, or identical. Mistie will have our strength, even in the worst situation." She came across and rested her hand on her daughter's shoulder.

"I am tired. No, exhausted. I am stuck, and have no idea where to begin."

Quin leaned back in his chair. "First, is a good night's rest. Then we go to the library in the morning."

"I don't want to read right now, at least not for fun. Nothing seems fun anymore."

Mom lightly laughed.

"We will go to the research department to research magazines, crime reports, and more. I was there today; they have plenty to start with. We can find a town, and track down their records departments. Public records will have her name on them. It's a unique enough name."

Hope surged thought her mind once again. "Well, we better wash these pans, if we are going to rest. I need to organize my notes."

Mom shooed them out of the kitchen "Go on. I'll do the dishes. You have more important work to do. Don't forget to plug the phones in to charge."

Tricia and Quin hurried up the concrete steps to the imposing building.

They reached the large glass doors, and had to wait until the woman turned the lock inside.

The lock turned slow.

Quin led the way.

Tricia clutched her folder of notes. As she hurried past the stacks she missed browsing through, she paused to glance at a few titles in a section she didn't know well. Several titles grabbed her attention, all on finding roots, and tracing family trees. Quickly, she grabbed them and raced after her brother.

He turned at the top of the stairs leading into the basement. "Something useful?"

"Maybe."

Down the stairs, past a small section for recent magazines, then down a long dark tunnel.

At a closed door, Quin stopped. He turned the handle. It was locked.

"I told her we'd be early today," Quin said.

The sound of keys clanged down the hallway. Slowly, they crept along, until a woman came into view. "I've never seen anyone in such a hurry before. When was your research paper due?"

"At least ten years ago," Tricia said.

The woman eyed her as she slowly unlocked the door. They had to wait for her to turn on the lights. "The machines are over there. The files are in order in those boxes, and in the stacks behind. It will take about twenty minutes for the machines to warm up so you can use them."

Too much wasted time waiting. She sat the books down by one Microfiche machine, but kept the folder with her. She and Quin walked to the table the woman had pointed to. There was a listing of all the magazines that were stored in these stacks.

Quin stared at the list a moment.

"Where do we start?" Tricia asked.

"I'd suggest the newspapers from the place we all lived together. Any from the entire year, and six months after we all moved away. I'll bring them. You can have August - January, and I'll take February through July."

Tricia nodded.

He searched through the boxes.

This research area had never been a place she liked to visit. Of course, Quin liked it. It had a sense of something that disturbed her. Something that reminded her of Mistie. She turned back to the books she had chosen. The spines crinkled as she leafed through

them. A section on how to use the Microfilm machines to trace family names grabbed her interest.

As soon as she finished reading the article, she turned to the box Quin had sat beside her.

The librarian walked over and taught her how to use the machine.

This research was a hope to find any trace of Mistie, or her family.

"Do you remember Mistie's mom's name?"

Tricia pulled her eyes away from the screen. "I don't think I ever heard it. Would it help?"

"Tremendously. I'm going to ask the librarian if she has a phone I can use to call Momma."

"Did you find something?"

"Not sure. When we are done with these boxes, we will go backwards to the other schools you mentioned."

Tricia went back to reading. Plenty of social pages, and other business news that would normally interest her, but nothing with Mistie's first name, or last name appeared.

After a week of searching, Quin and Tricia had found little information. The librarian had come to expect them to be there from open to close. Quin closed the last box their hopes had rested on.

"So little for all of our effort," he said.

Tricia held her notes to her chest. "We would have a better chance of finding our pre-reservation ancestors, than where she is now. Maybe Helen should work on that as her home school project."

Quin laughed. "She won't like us giving her work."

Tricia glanced at him sideways. "She might."

"Let's go. We need a break, and will have to decide which way to go next."

"We can always find for a good investigator who knows more ways to research than we do."

Chapter 19

Mistie meets Joan and Trudy Argyle - Age 20

Mistie stared out of the plane window as it descended. By the time it taxied on the runway to the terminal, excitement flowed through her body. Though her fingers wiggled as she gripped her book bag of personal items, she remained calm.

The terminal was crowded, even at that late hour.

She pushed carefully through the people to find the first empty bank of pay phones. There wasn't enough change in her pocket for a long-distance call. The phone card in her purse had enough for ten minutes' conversation.

As the phone rang, Mistie realized the time difference and almost hung up the phone. Emma would be sound asleep.

"Hello?" A sleepy voice answered.

Redness reflected on the phone booth's metal from her blushed face. "Hi Emma, sorry to wake you. I wanted to let you know I made it to California safe."

A slight snore could be heard in the background. "It's okay Mistie. I am glad you called. Thank you for remembering me. Let me know if you need anything."

"Sure. I'll be fine. The shuttle will be here in an hour. Thanks for everything."

"Call soon." Emma hung up gently.

Mistie hung up the phone and murmured. "Poor Emma, I shouldn't have called."

"Don't be so sure, I bet she's glad you called."

Mistie turned to see who spoke, and recognized a woman from her base.

"Friends always like to know we made it safe, as well as moms."

"She's more of a mom to me than my own mom." Mistie stammered. She realized what she said, and turned to hurry off.

The woman reached out and tapped her shoulder. "It's okay. It happens to the best of us. Parents have a tough time letting go, and holding on too. I don't know your situation. I know you never speak of home."

Mistie stared at the woman. Her shoulders dropped. "Is it that obvious?"

"You don't even remember my name, do you?"

Mistie looked at her. This woman she had spent six weeks of basic training with. Ate meals with, slept in the same barracks room. Who was she? At last, she turned away to find her luggage.

Her bag looked so tiny next to vacationers who would only be here a week or so. She had plenty of time. How long had it been since she had called her mom? Six months? A year? Was that devastating last attempt to help her the last time she spoke to her?

With bag in hand, she turned back to the phone bank to place one more call. As she did, she saw the unknown friend there talking to someone on the phone. She reached up and dialed the number. To her surprise, there was an answer.

"Hello?" a sleepy voice answered.

"Mom? Are you awake? It's Mistie."

"Hi Mistie. I'm about to go to bed. How are you?"

"I'm okay. A long ways from home, and going to training in a few minutes."

"Okay. I don't have time to talk now. Or for a few weeks." The phone clicked off. A dial tone and recording reminded her to deposit money if she wanted to place a call.

Warm tears tickled down her cheek. Her mother didn't know, or care where she was. Or what training she was going to.

The friend she couldn't name stood nearby waiting.

Mistie didn't want to look at her. She attempted to go around her to reach the shuttle waiting area.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything," the woman said.

"At least she spoke to me this time. Almost like a normal person." The tears remained thick in her eyes.

"Hey, I'm Joan Argyle." The woman held out her hand to Mistie. "Please, let's be friends. I'm here on a home trip. Waiting for the family to wake up. They always wake up early. What about you?"

"I'm here to study foreign languages and decide where to from there. Not sure. I am always waiting for something to happen."

Joan grabbed a paper and pen. "Here, take my number and call me sometime. I'll be on the base again next week. Maybe we can go to the ocean and relax."

She handed the paper to Mistie and left as a large group of people walked her way.

Mistie hurried to meet the shuttle.

The shuttle passed through the busy city and onto the crowded freeway, packed at 2am. Vehicles jammed closer than could be safe at any, or even no speed.

Her mind drifted back to the last few days in the country, and the visit to the farm.

That farm with chickens crowing, cows mooing, dogs barking, and all the busy activity was almost this loud. Not quite. It felt so much safer, and almost a home type place. This place did not feel safe. There seemed no order to the chaos.

She nodded back awake as the shuttle reached the base gates.

The other tired soldiers beside her woke and rubbed their eyes as well. The shuttle was soon allowed to pass, and reached a large building, the only one the lights seemed to be fully on inside.

Mistie fell in behind the rest of the group as they entered the early morning processing line.

Many of the people were here for training, besides recent boot camp graduates. There were also people who were advancing and sharing their knowledge and skills with the newer residents.

After the initial paperwork processing line, came the bunk assignment line. At least here, she would have her own space. The man at the bunk table was quiet as the noisy crowd ahead of her went through, handing out sheets and towels. He almost turned away before she walked up.

"Sorry, thought everyone was through. They are all so excited."

"They are excited. Difficult to be so excited at this time of the morning."

"Do you have everything you need?"

"I think so. Anything I should know about the base?"

"Don't be out too late. Don't go to the beach and forget to come back. Have fun."

Mistie smiled. "Thanks."

She turned to go out the door. The marked map showed where she was, and where she needed to go.

Outside, voices continued as groups herded themselves slowly towards the bunk area.

"Hey, Mistie!"

Startling her from behind, she turned to look. Was it Joan? No, some other young woman. They all tended to look rather alike in uniform anyway. She waited while the young woman caught up.

"Mistie, I hoped to see you again. Joan called and said you would be here."

"What?"

"I didn't take a break. I came here to train for police duty, and work at night. She said to make sure you know your way around. You're so quiet, you would never ask questions. Let's go to your bunk row."

The young woman silently hurried beside her. As Mistie was about to go inside, she spoke again. "Enjoy your stay, and be careful." At that, she practically jumped back until Mistie was safe inside.

Mistie felt a little nervous. Unpacking wouldn't take long. A short nap was all the time there was before her early morning class. No sleep for her, but that was okay for one night. It would help set her body's clock to California time. As she finished unpacking, the phone rang.

"Hello?" Mistie said.

"Hi Mistie. It's Joan. Sorry to call you. Hope you are safe?"

"Yes, what's wrong?"

"I'm concerned about you. You are so quiet and shy. Some people here will take that wrong. You need to come out of your shell."

"I don't drink alcohol, or any other bad habits," Mistie said.

"It isn't all about that. In fact, none of that. Hold your head up, smile, and a few other things. Anyway, after class today, you can meet my family. My mom is a professor who works with shy people to learn how to stand up for themselves."

The phone clicked off. Mistie sat down on the bed. "Am I that obvious? Or is it oblivious?"

The first day of classes was a basic overview of language families and their classification systems, an interesting study in itself. However, in the next few days, she would have to decide which set of languages she wanted to study.

As she exited the study room, last to leave as always, Joan waited on her.

"Hi Mistie. I brought my mom along. She wanted to meet you before the rest of the family. They tend to bubble."

Mistie laughed as she slid into the backseat of the little car. "How many are in your family?"

"About ten people live at my mom's house any given day."

"About?"

The woman in the passenger seat smiled back at Mistie and laughed. "People are always coming and going. Relatives visiting, and forgetting to go home. Friends, anyone who needs a few days of vacation from their family."

"Dad's house is much calmer. Only him and my youngest brother."

"You are separated?"

"As much as everyone else needs a vacation, sometimes I need one too. My son can't handle the constant commotion. Usually, I ask people to tell me about themselves. I think you need to know the area first."

Joan had driven off the base and was driving towards town while her mom talked about all the places and people she knew.

Mistie dreaded the drive through the city again. Before reaching it, the car turned off into a suburb, and soon pulled up to a large house with all the windows open, and people everywhere.

"Perhaps we should go to dad's house?" Joan said.

"Let's do. Wave hi to everyone." Joan's mom said.

After waving, they turned and walked across the street.

Mistie followed, not sure about this unique family style.

This house was quite different, smaller, more compact. Inside, while open, it felt close and comforting with big furniture, ready to hold you safe.

Joan's mom settled across from Mistie. She was similar to Emma, and so different from her own mother.

"Mistie, I don't want to know your past if you don't want to tell me."

"I'd rather not talk about it."

No questions were asked. No accusations made. Mistie and Joan enjoyed a quiet afternoon tea with Joan's mother. Tea with Joan's mom wasn't the same as with Emma. There was a different relaxing quality to it.

Their talk centered on the beach, and Joan's family's comings and goings. Though plenty of opportunity was given for Mistie to speak, she chose not to, enjoying listening more than talking.

They visited a few hours before Joan put away the tea cups. "We better take you back to base, or they will think you aren't coming back."

Mistie laughed, and followed Joan outside to her mom's car. "Thanks."

"Any time. Call soon."

The ride back to base was quiet. Her thoughts filled with the words of Joan and the mothers she knew.

Chapter 20

Merlish and Cal Seek Legal Help - Forever Young - Year 22

"More tables, Cal. Over here." Merlish pointed to an almost empty area in the warehouse. A few days ago, only a few tables had been visible, and piles of boxes everywhere. Today, the boxes were neatly stacked along one wall, with tables in front.

"Set up almost like a show, isn't it? Wish it was a show." Cal set up another table.

"As long as we have enough tables to arrange all of our data for our lawyer to see. I'll set it up." Merlish walked to the table nearest the door. Here, was where the lawyer would likely want to start. The beginning of the project. First, the faded handwritten letters from the client laid out nice and neat. Beside them were the purple triplicate files on the egg donor. After her were more purple triplicate files of the ten women. Their print had smeared years ago. During a rain storm. Each file contained more files on the fertilization process, and child's birth.

Girls. Always girls. No boys. Hadn't seemed odd at the time. Had my partner been aware that all the fertilized eggs were female?

Staring at the surrogate mother's files, Merlish noticed something that he hadn't paid attention to before. All the women were named after flowers, seasons, or other odd things. Daisy, Rose, Jan, May, Summer, Sunshine, Sherry. Was anything significant in their names? Were they all fake names?

These folders on the tables only touched the surface. Summaries of each case were stored in boxes against the wall for each aspect of their study. Already three tables down, Merlish pulled out the first child's study highlights. Ginny, identical to Tammy, yet raised apart, in close locations to study similar environments in identical twins. Tammy with a child of her own now. Ginny deep in a depression, and on medication. Tammy's cover sheet had a picture of her and her young daughter smiling at the

camera. Ginny was huddled into a ball, not looking up at the camera. He placed each file on the table.

Merlish picked up the next file. Brandy died in childbirth three days ago. Identical to Sophia, raised far apart, to study how vastly different locations may affect identical twins. Tears trickled down his cheek as he placed the files on the table. Brandy's death certificate copy spotlighted for all to see.

The next table was set up for Tara and Lottie. Fraternal twins raised apart, far apart, to see how the different environments might affect twins as well. Again, only one, Lottie had a child almost due.

Merlish looked up from his work.

Cal set up the last table.

"Do we know who the father is for any of the girl's children?"

"Neither they, nor their mother's will say. The girls don't have any idea. No memory of being sexually active. Odd, isn't it?" He continued to straighten the last table.

Merlish let the folder slide out of his hand and downward, as he moved along. Ashley and Kaylee were next, two identicals. Kaylee was still in her birth state. While Ashley had moved far away. Kaylee's picture showed a shy, girl with downcast eyes.

Cal walked up.

Merlish held Ashley's folder. "She is the only one who they haven't seen in almost a decade, since before she was ten. How we kept up with her, I have no idea." Ashley had a slight sparkle in her eye, and reportedly helped her mom volunteer for a spouse abuse shelter.

"Liza worked hard at keeping track of them. I don't envy her the job she had to do."

"It really tore her up, there at the end, with so many becoming destructive. At first, I thought it was typical teens, then I met a few."

Merlish moved on to the next table. Here were the files on Kelly and Casey, two fraternals raised together.

"Casey was scared of men. Kelly, I think she was scared too, though she felt she had to attack them in her own way." Cal shivered as he remembered the encounter.

Merlish placed the files on the table, ready to be examined. The boxes against the wall showed all the work that had gone into each child. To live to see their lives fall apart was devastating.

The last table was Mistie's table. Unexpected child of the egg donor. So different from the other girls, now women. He held the files in his hand. "We are sure she had the same father?"

"That is what the client said. His sperm and her egg, converged naturally."

"So, does this mean that the other eggs were damaged?"

"Or the sperm. I think not. While the lawyer can help us take care of the legal aspects, we will need more help." Cal edged closer.

"How can we prove anything at this point?"

Cal picked up Mistie's folder. "She is so different, and so similar. DNA testing is becoming common in these cases. It's our only hope."

Merlish nodded. "Guess I have been so busy wrapping up the various studies and preparing to retire, I hadn't thought DNA was reliable enough to use at this point."

"It is now. It may provide some answers."

"Or more confusion. I think it would be best to test all the girls if we can, and even their mothers. Do you think it's too late to obtain samples from Brandy?"

"No idea. At least we can attempt to obtain samples from her child."

The door slammed.

Merlish and Cal glanced up.

Their lawyer strode in. "Hello. How are you both today?"

Merlish walked around the table towards the lawyer. "Okay Mr. Gleam. Trying to organize all the paperwork to more easily answer your questions. We have more questions than answers now." He reached Mr. Gleam and shook his hand.

Mr. Gleam glanced at the full tables, with boxes lining the walls, almost around the entire warehouse. "Can we sit down and talk before we look at the evidence?"

Cal and Merlish rushed over to the computer stations and grabbed office chairs to push over to the first table.

Mr. Gleam looked at the folders of the girls. "Lots of work, here I see."

"Yes sir. We know something isn't right. We can't put our fingers on it. We feel we need help, and hope for the girls left alive." Merlish sat beside the first table.

"What do you have ready?"

Cal passed Mr. Gleam a chair. "Sit, it will be awhile. Right now, we have all of the cases out for the eleven girls in this particular study. We have computed results of all of the other twin studies we have completed, in the other boxes lining the walls. We have compared them." He sat beside Merlish.

"The results are not good. All of the other twin studies compare with one another. This study compares more with a survivors of abuse study completed by our rivals." Cal waved at the boxes. "We have multiple boxes on each child and her mother, as well as all of the evidence from other study cases."

Mr. Gleam pulled out his legal pad. "Let's begin at the beginning then. When did the study start?"

Merlish took the lead. He picked up the first folder and explained the process to Mr. Gleam.

As the hours passed, they slowly rolled down the line of tables. Mr. Gleam took notes. At last, they reached the last table.

Merlish picked up the first of Mistie's folders. "We have met and spoken to her. She is so different than all of the other girls. She is the only one who isn't unemployable. She is in the Army now."

"Is there anything else?" Mr. Gleam made a note on the last page of his notepad.

"We want to add a DNA analysis to the study. Of all the girls, their mothers, and this couple. Not sure how to do so without arousing suspicions. Not sure we have the legal right to do it now." Cal glanced at his notes.

"If the study was starting now, instead of ending now, we would naturally, start with DNA," Merlish said.

"Obtain DNA from the girls and mothers without arousing suspicions. Leave the couple out at the moment. Don't contact them at all about your suspicions. There are some unique legal aspects for this case. With what I see so far, I can't prove illegal activity, only odd activity," Mr. Gleam said.

"We will," Cal said. "What else can we do to help you?"

"Can you provide paper copies of the most important papers, and floppy disk files of everything, even notes?"

Mr. Gleam looked at Merlish.

"That's Cal's work. He does the computer stuff. I can find a copier, and copy what needs copying."

"It may take a box of disks. At least a month of work. I will do my best." Cal said.

"Good. I will meet these school nurses as well. As soon as I have their information, I'll call you. Call me if you think of anyone else who may be of value in the case. This case is more than twenty years in the making. It won't be solved overnight."

He stood up to leave, and handed his business card to Merlish. "Be sure the results land in my hands. Keep the files locked up safe and secure. Call only. Don't fax or email anything."

Mr. Gleam walked out the door. The building lights seemed to dim. Silence descended, louder than Merlish remembered.

"Time to box them back up and lock them in the office."

Cal nodded. "Coffee?"

"You make it. I'll start a new box."

Cal pushed two chairs back to the computers.

Merlish walked down the line of tables. So much had happened in the twenty-two years. Twenty-two women and their children wronged. All for a study that had seemed okay at the time. A time before computers, cordless phones, internet, or DNA. Today, any one of those items would have stopped the study before it started. Or at least before the first child was born.

Chapter 21

Tricia at an Impasse, Helen's Find - Age 20

Stacks of files around the room filled all the empty space. One small stack, on her desk by the computer held the papers from her trip to the school she and Mistie once attended.

Tricia grabbed these and flopped on the bed. Next to her, on a chair were her notes from the library. She searched the pages, looking for anything that would provide hope. It seemed fruitless. Endless pages, with no connection.

Quin walked in with a tea tray. "Working again, I see. Sometimes a rest will give you the chance to see things in a new light."

"How did Helen like her assignment?"

"She adored it. She took one of her best friends with her to research both families. We may not see her for a month or two." Quin took a cookie from the tray. He winked.

Tricia held out the pages. "The ink is smudged in so many places. So tiny, I'm sure I'm missing something."

Quin finished his cookie and took the pages. The ones on top were from Tricia's file; basic information, report cards. Under those was a file cover sheet. He gazed at it in awe. "Do we have Mistie's copy of this?"

Tricia glanced at it. "Sure, that is how I tracked down her pervious schools. It's here somewhere." She dug through Mistie's pile, and handed the file sheet to Quin.

"Here it is. Mistie's parent's names and addresses. The print is almost too tiny to see. Can we follow them through post office change of address slips?"

"Probably not. It's been too many years. We can't legally obtain that information. The people who live in the home now may remember the people who moved, maybe."

Quin grabbed her notepad and scribbled a few things down. "It's worth a try. Plus, I can go back and research both of these names quickly."

Tricia laughed. "If Helen doesn't bombard you with questions."

Quin took another cookie as he hurried from the room.

A clue isn't much without some substance. The piles of files were too much right now. A change of scenery would be nice. Tricia picked up the tray and walked downstairs to the kitchen.

A few days later, Tricia was busy in the kitchen, fixing coffee and cake.

Her mom sat at the table, hands on her head, bent over papers, totally lost in thought.

"Why did they name her Patricia?" Tricia asked.

Helen seemed to reach for distant memories. "Gramma was sure she was pregnant with twins. The doctor knew what name she would have given the second child."

"Did you name my sister?" Tricia's hands stopped mid-stir of the coffee cup she was carrying to the table.

"No. I had no idea I was pregnant with twins. If only your father had been allowed in the delivery room, at least Mistie would have been spared. I do think that is a wonderful name though."

Tears filled her mom's eyes.

Tricia reached to comfort her. "All is not lost. We will find her. If we have to search every apartment building and home in the country. Every hospital, and every shelter, we will find her."

"I hope so, for your sake, and for hers. Sad. No one ever truly thought this was reasonable, until today."

"We will find them. Your sister too. I want to meet my aunt. Whoever she is."

Helen had found it, at the library while researching the family tree.

The biography held the dirty secret they now all feared. The doctor who had brought their mother, and then themselves, into this word was a baby seller. Here was the proof of how his evil plan had been carried out.

It almost seemed as if it had ears to hear them. The picture on the cover was of a baby being torn from a mother, and handed to another. Another beside it showed a fearful young girl, with a man behind her that hinted at more than a touch just below her cutoff waist. That book was written by one of the survivors of the baby seller.

He was never brought to justice. As the law finally closed in on him, he hanged himself, over the paper trial of his many crimes. Some families had found their lost ones. Others never knew they had a lost family member. Many now wondered, if, and how, to begin the search.

The back cover copy gave his reason for being a baby seller. "Everyone has the right to one child, none to two at one time. Plus, they are all so poor, they cannot afford to raise more than one in a lifetime."

There it sat. That quote. Like a brick on a beating heart.

Who was he to judge? Once, we were poor. Now, look at all we have. A wonderful family and house. However, we have always felt the ghost of something missing in our lives. We almost wait for their answers when family councils are held. We never realized how much we knew, in our souls, they belonged here, in our family home.

Tricia turned at the sound of flying feet.

"Momma, Sis, I found something!" Helen dropped panting to the floor.

"My friend knows a private detective. All we have to do is take everything we know, write it down, and send it to him."

"How long will it take? And how much will it cost?"

"Who cares the cost, find my sister and my aunt!" Helen tossed the papers on the table and ran out of the room.

"I don’t care the cost. I need a starting point." Their mother picked up the pages to read the bio. "Fritz is his name. It means peace. Exactly what we need. Here Tricia, figure out what we need, and start writing."

"Quin and I will put our notes together and start tomorrow. He isn't home and it will take all night to decide what is most vital." Tricia picked up the book. "This is definitely evidence. We need copies of all of our birth certificates. We need to gather hospital records before we send off anything."

Her mother wrapped her hands around her coffee cup to warm her fingers. "Check the safe, next to Mistie's box."

Tricia went into her Gramma's former room. She turned to the bed, much more from habit than anything. Nothing was changed.

As neatly made as ever. She sighed as she prepared to open the safe.

She gathered the pages in her hands, and made sure the box was secure in the back. Sitting on the bed, she sorted through the family records. She set all the birth certificates in one pile, and placed the other pages back in the safe, locking it carefully. Examining her own certificate, the name seemed oddly familiar. Maybe I should research this hospital.

She carried it down the hall to her own room. She picked up the phone book for the town where the hospital was located and called the records department.

"Hello," a woman answered.

"Hello, I would like to receive a copy of my children's birth certificates please."

"I don't think you are old enough to have children."

"Sure I am."

"You will have to send proof of identity."

Tricia hung up the phone. I'll ask mom to call tomorrow, or maybe a few days later, so no one would realize what they were doing.

Chapter 22

Name Change to Mistie Nova

The beach should be fun. A salty breeze drifted in through the car window. Mistie clutched her tote bag.

Joan pulled the car into the empty parking lot. She turned off the headlights and the engine. "Come on Mistie. Your first look at the sea, before all the tourists arrive."

Mistie slowly stepped out of the car.

Joan was already almost out of sight.

"Wait for me! I'll grab my bag."

"It's a long hike to the place I want to go. This is the nearest parking lot."

At the road's edge, sand and grass fought nature's battle to overtake the other. A battle which had been going on since grass first formed on the beaches. They walked down the ramp to the sand.

Sunlight peeked over the horizon. Joan slowed the pace. They walked closer to the ocean. Large rocks had washed up on shore eons before. Waves cascaded across the sand, gently lapping their feet.

When they reached a cove, Joan stopped. "This should do. Now you can relax and watch the ocean waves and sunrise."

Mistie placed her tote bag on the ground and walked forward to the water. As she placed her hand in the warmth, some memory disturbed her. A shadow, not even a fully formed thought. She couldn't grasp it. As out of reach as a cloud in the sky, or the circling birds above their heads.

"Mistie you okay?"

Her hands had clinched. "Not sure what thoughts passed through my memory."

The rest of the morning was fun. Exploring tidal pools, and watching the tides. However, some little cloud always hung over the horizon, waiting. Sneaking tendrils of fear across the almost perfect day.

Waves lapped up the beach, soon followed by other beach goers. Mistie and Joan leaned back on the sand, staring up at the clouds. Joan told stories about her childhood.

Mistie listened, half-heartedly.

Joan partially sat up and looked over to Mistie. "What dreams did you have?"

She watched the gentle clouds above her fold and fade. "I don't really remember any. I was too busy trying to study and stay alive."

Joan sat up and reached for her bag. "Why don't we go visit my mom before going back to the base?"

"Sounds good. Hope we can come back here soon though. It's nice when it's quiet." She glanced back at the beach. Many people played in the surf, and several sat near them. "Race you to the car."

Mistie enjoyed her weekends spent with Joan and her family. They kept her busy enough that the bad dreams did not come on the nights she had spent with the family. She couldn't explain the bad dreams to anyone. How could she? Pictures would form in her mind. She couldn't hold them long enough to figure out what the pictures were of.

Sometimes, one would occur while she was asleep, and she would wake up wet with sweat, and a dreadful fear of the unknown. Glancing in her mirror in the morning, even she noticed the haunted look others mentioned. She adjusted her uniform.

Joan knocked on the door.

"Hey Mistie, Mom sent breakfast!"

Mistie opened the door.

Joan stepped back for a moment. "What's wrong?"

She took the covered plate. "Tell your mom thanks for me." She turned to walk to her bed. Tears welled in her eyes.

Footsteps told her Joan had followed, instead of closing the door.

Joan placed her hand gently on Mistie's shoulder. "Is it the nightmares again?"

She nodded. Trying to force the tears back, she mumbled. "I don't understand."

Joan sat beside her and waited until Mistie regained her composure.

Mistie looked up, as refreshed as possible.

Joan walked over and closed the door. "Mistie, I have an idea of how to help you. It's dangerous. I would never recommend it if I didn't think it was the only option. You know what hypnosis is?"

Mistie nodded. "Don't want that."

Joan walked back to her and sat down. "No, not by someone else. There is one kind of self-hypnosis, though that may work. It's dangerous, and can lead to addiction. You have to promise me you won't let it be an addiction if I tell you how to do it."

Mistie watched her face. "Drugs would get us kicked out of the army."

Joan smiled. "Not drugs, or at least not ones that aren't used by 99% of the army."

"Then what?"

"Promise me first. For your life and safety. I will give you the information. Then, it is up to you to decide if you want the risk."

"Don't worry Joan. I've lived with obsessive compulsive disorder since I was a pre-teen. I can battle any addiction."

Joan grabbed Mistie's hands. "If you do this, you must always be with someone you trust. Promise me that."

"Yes, I can do that."

"Okay, do you have any other friends?"

"There is Justin and his mom, Emma. I'm going to visit them in a few weeks when we have some off time."

"Good. Okay, with me, or Justin, you can do this. There are a few alcoholic drinks that are safe. Drink enough to feel happy. Lay down and close your eyes."

"Sounds simple."

"It is. The pictures will come again. Don't be afraid of them. Or fight them. Sometimes, the first time, you don't drink enough alcohol. Don't take too much, or it won't do the job."

"What's the job?"

"When you lay there, smiling and happy drunk, the pictures will come. Look at them, laugh at them, and let them go. Hopefully, you will only have to do this a few times before the pictures are gone, and you can stay away from alcohol, and the memories, forever."

If the nightmares continued, they would destroy her life as much as any addiction. In fact, trying to figure them out without help, might be an addiction in itself.

"When and where could we do such an experiment?"

"It needs to be somewhere safe, quiet, and somewhere you trust. How about dad's house this weekend? He will be out of town with my brother."

"I can't think of any reason not to do it this weekend."

Joan released her hands. "You may not feel anything the first time, as your body isn't used to alcohol."

"I'll be there."

A few nights later, Mistie and Joan tried the experiment.

Joan's mom knew about the ordeal, and kept the rest of the family away.

The alcohol relaxed her. As she lay on the couch, she began to see pictures of people she didn't remember. They flashed before her. She screamed, and the pictures flashed away.

"What did you see?" Joan was by her side.

Mistie's whole body shook.

In a few minutes, Joan's mom was there. They checked her blood pressure, her temperature, and blood sugar.

"A little high on all counts. Nothing serious. Let her sleep it off."

Joan sat close to Mistie after her mom left, and covered her with blankets.

A week later, they attempted again.

This time the strange pictures came. Mistie was able to view them. Tears flooded her cheeks, as she gasped for air.

Joan helped her to sit up. She couldn't talk about them.

The following weekend, she was able to view the memories more clearly. The flashbacks come full force. While lightly drunk, she was numb. She looked at the pictures as they flashed above her head. They struck cords of fear in her heart. That man's leer simply won't go away. She remembered she was supposed to laugh loud and hard. Laugh, and they will go away, and forget to haunt another day.

Mistie laughed as the tears streamed down her face. The leer, and other faces, subsided. She was unable to talk about them. In fact, she no longer remembered faces.

That Saturday, after waking up, Joan's mother came to visit them.

"Do you think it's over?"

"No idea," Mistie said. "I hope so."

"Do you remember anything, or want to talk about it?"

Mistie attempted to reach and remember. She had laughed at the nightmares to banish them. "No, I don't remember. That concerns me."

Joan looked at her mom, then back at Mistie. "Mistie, do you fear for your safety?"

Mistie thought about that for a few minutes. She had often feared someone followed her. Not Liza, Cal, or even Merlish. "Maybe."

"We don't want to worry you. For your own happiness, safety, and to break from the past, perhaps you might want to consider changing your name."

Mistie asked for personal time on Monday, to make important phone calls ahead of her trip. She managed to reach the courthouse in Justin's hometown to schedule a name change while visiting with Justin and Emma for a week.

Emma met Mistie at the airport. She walked up and hugged her.

"It's wonderful to see you Mistie. Later you can explain your messages."

She sat at the now familiar kitchen table and explained everything that had happened. Long drawn faces showed their disbelief. They squirmed, and tried not to interrupt while she discussed the therapy.

"Are you sure you are safe? Who are Merlish, Cal, and Liza?" Emma asked.

"I have researched them. They are who they say they are. Not really good guys. Not bad guys, of their own free will. In fact, I have

another meeting with them, and a private investigator in a few weeks."

"Do you want me there?" Justin asked. "I can be there."

"No. I'll be fine."

"Will you do anymore therapy?" Justin grinned.

"Hopefully not. At least not anytime soon." She shivered. That was an experience she hoped to forget.

"Tomorrow, you fill out the paperwork to legally change your name. Do you think that will protect you?" Emma poured more tea.

"Not likely. It will give the investigators a bit more time. A more positive name will be good for me though."

"What will you change your name to?" Emma stirred her cup.

"I like my first name," Mistie said. "So I will change my last name. How about 'Nova' as it means new? It will be all about the new me and the new life I will lead."

"Sounds good," Justin said.

"Strong enough."

The judge did not act surprised as he accepted her reason for a name change.

She simply told him she felt a new name for a new future was a good idea. Within minutes, the legal name change was complete.

The walk out of the courtroom was light hearted.

"Now comes the fun part. You have to change all of your ids. By the way, what address were you using on your driver's license?" Emma pushed the elevator button.

Mistie looked through her pack to find it, not even sure herself. "Apparently, the last place I lived with my mom." Does mom receive any mail for me? I've never asked.

"Come on Mistie, we need to update your ids before go back to the base next week." Justin held out his hand. "You can update the address. What will you use?"

"Not college. We aren't there anymore. We can't really use the base address as it will change in a few months. So, I'm not sure."

Emma placed her hand on Mistie's shoulder. "Use ours. Also, be sure you have someone you trust listed as your emergency contact."

The tone Emma spoke in made Mistie look up at her.

Emma's face showed she would gladly be that person, or Justin if she had to choose.

Mistie gulped and walked forward to the window to update her driver's license.

"Good thing you came today," the woman said. "This old one will expires next week."

Mistie hadn't bothered to check. Hadn't even thought about a driver's license expiring. Odd, though she checked everything, that one paper had never crossed her mind to check. Her paperwork was processed, vision checked, and her picture taken. She made a note of the new expiration date.

Chapter 23

Researchers, Mistie, and Fritz Collaborate - Forever Young - Year 22

Merlish unlocked the door to the warehouse. He turned on the bank of lights. All of them, instead of the few they normally used.

The line of tables sat empty. Walls empty. Everything locked away safe.

A few minutes later Cal arrived.

No words were spoken. No words needed to be.

Merlish unlocked the storage area.

Cal prepared the cart to move the boxes in order back to the tables.

The door slammed.

Both Cal and Merlish looked up.

Liza entered the building. Her steps faltered as she stared at the line of tables. "Mr. Gleam called last night and said I should be here today. He won't be. He feels my information may be important to the case."

"Can you bring the round table out, and put five good office chairs there please?" Merlish said.

Liza sat her papers on a table and went into an unlocked storage area.

Merlish sorted the boxes and files as Cal brought them to him. They would be doubled up, so that the other studies could be easily found as well to compare if necessary.

A ray of sunlight crossed the table.

Merlish looked up.

Mistie stood in the opened door.

"Come in Mistie. Don't be afraid."

Mistie walked in and gently closed the door. She walked up to the table where the cases were laid out. "I guess I shouldn't see these, should I?"

Merlish sighed while holding another file. "Normally, no. What we may find out today, though, is how many of these girls you have met. Sometimes, broken circumstances call for broken rules."

She stood there looking at the first few files. "Can I see what has been said about me?"

Merlish hesitated a second. "Your file will be out in a few minutes. Our lawyer knows you will hear about all of the cases."

Cal brought out the last box.

Merlish handed her file to her.

Mistie walked over to the round table and pulled out a chair to sit. The sheets contained comments and remarks. Nothing bad, and nothing good, no emotional statements, only facts. She stood up and carried the file back to the empty place left for it.

The door opened again. This man carried a box as he entered. He sat the box on the ground, and took a deep breath. "Hi, I am Fritz, are you Liza?"

Mistie looked at the box. "No, I am Mistie. Do you need help?"

Fritz watched her for a second. "Sure, I have another box. I'll be right back." He turned and left as quickly as he had entered.

As she reached for the box, Cal brushed her aside. "I'll see what he brought." Call lifted the flaps to a disarray of papers, pens, and notepads. He carried it to the round table, and brought an extra chair for it to sit on.

Fritz came back into the building and hurried to the central table with a smaller box. "Do you have a coffee pot, and extension cords? We need fuel, for us, and the tape recorder."

Merlish nodded, and went to fetch the extension cords.

Fritz looked up as he headed to the office. "Perhaps we should lock all of us in, so no one can sneak in the doors."

"Good idea." Merlish closed and locked the door. The slide lock would keep any out unwelcome guests.

At last, all of the preparations were complete, and the meeting could begin.

Silence descended as the coffee pot dripped. The tape recorder, a stack of ninety-minute tapes, and a legal pad covered the table.

Fritz looked around the table, eyes on each person for mere seconds. "When I turn the recorder on, I want each person to introduce themselves. Then, we will begin."

With an echoing click, the suspense deepened.

Merlish spoke first. Occasionally, he would have to fetch folders to verify information. He filled up two tapes worth of information with short stops for coffee refills as they went along.

Cal then took over. His review of the statistics was short and to the point, though he filled one side of a tape himself. By the time he finished talking, the table was littered with snack bags, as well as notes, and coffee cups.

Liza spoke next.

Merlish listened closely, perhaps more closely than ever before to the words she said. Each incident alone seemed insignificant. Together, they all now knew it was significant. She finished. A tear dripped on the pages in her shaking hands.

"I wish I had heard them all at once before." Merlish crumpled his paper cup.

She turned away to hide the tears.

Cal reached over and patted her arm. "Really, until the last few visits, we had no reliable physical evidence. Emotional evidence sure. It would never stand in a court of law. Maybe someday emotional evidence will be enough to count in the courts."

Mistie had sat silent and still through the whole process. She had hung on every word said, without any semblance of emotion.

Fritz glanced at Mistie as he changed the tape. "Better take a short break. You have no more than 1 1/2 hours yourself. Then I give my speech."

She nodded.

They all stood up to stretch their arms and legs. Few words were spoken.

As they gathered back around the table a few minutes later. Mistie appeared more distant than ever. The echoing click let her know the tape was ready.

Mistie closed her eyes and began to tell her life story. She did not open them again, nor refer to her notes until the tape clicked off. She waited until it clicked on again to continue.

The story she told was astonishing to Merlish, Cal, and Liza. Sure, they had all begun to guess how difficult the lives of these girls had been. Hearing from the mouth of one of them was so much more horrifying than they could ever have guessed from once a year meetings.

Mistie talked about being denied food. Living in a place more piled with garbage than a dump. Even trying to make years-old clothes reusable, long after they fit properly. She mentioned the constant moves, and her fears of them. Though each time, her hope that the new home would be her last. She talked about her visits with Liza, not looking at her as she spoke. She described her fears and uncertainties when she realized someone was studying her. And realized that her life was for some reason, radically different than the lives of other kids.

She brightened while talking about the teachers who kept her motivated. Hoping, knowing there had to be something different out there, somewhere. Mistie talked about her childhood hopes and dreams, somewhere warm, safe, and dry to live, with enough food to eat.

How many children normally thought such things on a regular basis?

The nightmares, and fears they must have felt due to the obvious emotional abuse. Several had mentioned times they couldn't remember. It had seemed odd before. However, Mistie articulated it in a way that they became fearful for the safety of the other girls, and their mothers. Had physical abuse occurred during these missing hours, days, weeks, and summer months?

The tape clicked again. "I am done. That's all I remember." Mistie closed her eyes.

Fritz glanced at her as he replaced the tape one more time. Its click resounded. "Okay. First, answer questions as we go over the case facts. Mistie, how many of the ten other girls do you remember?"

"I think Tammy is the only one." She sat for a moment as the others watched her. "No, there was Tricia. Where is she in your study? I haven't seen her file."

Liza and Cal turned to Merlish.

"Mistie, there was only you eleven girls. No Tricia that I know of. Tell me her story." Merlish glanced at his notes. No time to search the boxes for a forgotten name change.

"I don't remember her well. Her birthday was the same as mine." Mistie continued with the story as best as she could remember. "We only knew each other a few months in that one school. Then she

had to move soon after I did. If you don't know who she is, who is she?"

"I wish I knew." Were there girls created he didn't know about? Another study, unknown to them? Cal had checked and not turned up anything.

Cal and Liza looked as confused as he felt.

Fritz sat up in his chair. "Okay, so we have ten girls in dangerous situations. One who is trying to build a life. And another unknown girl. All women now."

No one contradicted him.

"Common denominator, is the older couple who were called grandparents by Mistie, and 'mother's friends' by the ten girls."

No response.

"The ten girls are in serious danger of further emotional abuse. Physical abuse cannot be substantiated at this point."

They all looked at Fritz.

"Without bumps, bruises, or broken bones, there is no proof they are in danger, legally speaking. Of course, we know better."

"What about the pregnancies?" Liza said.

"Not enough. We would have to prove the father was a legal adult while they were underage. We don't have proof of that. We have no proof of who the fathers may be, either one, or many."

"The emotional abuse set them up."

"Yes, we know that, psychologically. However, the law doesn't recognize emotional abuse as setting girls up for physical abuse. Until the physical abuse occurs, their hands are tied."

"It's too late anyway. They are adults now." Liza said.

"I regret ever being part of this case study. I regret allowing these young children to be brought into existence to be abused in such a manner." Merlish knocked a cup over. Coffee dribbled across the pages in front of Cal.

"When does your client want the results of this study?"

"Next year or so. We are supposed to be following the young women until they reach age 21."

"Well, keep doing so then. You all may be the only normalcy these girls ever see."

Fritz paused the tape long enough to refill his cup.

"Mr. Gleam has asked me to be sure you keep all records under multiple lock and key. He is doing an in-depth investigation of the couple, and the mothers. How is the DNA testing going?"

Cal flipped a few pages. "Hasn't started. We will re-start visits next week, and obtain samples then from as many girls and their moms as we can." He looked at Liza.

Liza didn't know this.

She had to do it. There was no other safe way. The young women were scared of Cal.

And he was more than scared of them.

"Okay. Mistie's today. Stay away from her mom and grandparents until we have a court order. Also, be sure to impress that this test is not to be mentioned to the mother's friends."

"That would make them suspicious," Mistie said. "If you do the swab test, or the hair strand test, tell them you are testing for some bug or something."

Liza gasped. "You are the one who told me secrets and lies are twin sisters."

Mistie smiled. "So they are. We are checking them for lice, and something else as well. You've kept so many secrets from them already; make this a little easier on them. After all, if they really are my sisters, I have the right to know, and need the proof before I go up and say hi."

"Mistie, please don't do that anytime soon," Fritz said.

Mistie looked hard at him. "Only after the people who did this meet the little justice they will receive."

Chapter 24

Tricia meets Fritz

Steep steps led upwards. Fourteen concrete steps to an open porch. A small building perched on top, almost as an afterthought. Dark clouds swirled above. A single ray of sunshine snuck under the cloud bank on the horizon, almost long enough to illuminate the door.

"Tricia, hurry before the storm breaks!" Mom scrambled up the steps with a bag.

"I'm hurrying. Helen, help me carry the box."

They dragged the box out. I wish I had remembered a tarp. Even a shower curtain would be nice right now.

As they dashed up the stairs, the first drops of rain hit. Surprisingly warm, even for a tropical storm.

A dark gloomy hall stretched endlessly, although the building appeared tiny on the outside. Lights illuminated lines under several closed doors, all about forty feet apart.

"Third on the left." Tricia panted. The door slammed behind her and her sister.

The sound of breathing carried as they crept down the hall. There was a sign on the door. "May you search for peace, all who enter here, Monty Fritz, Private Investigator."

Helen drew a deep breath and knocked on the door.

A boom echoed down the hallway. "Peaceful visitors may enter."

Momma opened the door slowly. Inside was a small room with only a few chairs and a table.

Helen and Tricia sat the box on the table.

A door opened revealing a middle-aged man. He was dressed for comfort and not an office visit. "Sorry, I live in the back part and have been frantically working all day. No time to change."

The women looked around the room. No sign of work to be done.

He saw them glancing. "My work area is set up in the back too. So no prying eyes can accidentally see another case."

Momma sat. "My son could not be here tonight. We have heard good things about you. Please help us."

The man waved his arm. "Please be seated. Call me Fritz. Tell me your story. Then I can say if I can help you or not."

Helen sat down.

Tricia stood by the box and looked at the contents. "Our story is complex. We aren't sure where to being. We know our side begins sixty years ago. My mother's twin was stolen. In fact, we did not even know about her for sure until we found out from grandmother Selene's suspicions. Afterwards, we found the baby doctor's book."

"So you wish to find your mother's sister?"

"Yes, and mine too." Tricia nearly whispered the last few words as her mind drifted.

"Well, we can run two things at once. Though it may not be easy, or cheap. What information do you have?"

Instead of speaking, Tricia handed him the book written about the baby seller.

He gulped at the sight of the book.

"Have you helped his victims before?"

Fritz looked at the book a moment longer, then up at her. He laid the book down. "I cannot discuss my ongoing cases. Though I can say I have heard of his crimes. What else do you have?"

Tricia pulled out the shoebox of pictures and drawings that Mistie had given her nearly fourteen years before. She also pulled out the plant container, and the old ring.

Fritz looked at each piece. "She would recognize these?"

"My sister, once known, as Mistie would."

Papers fluttered in his hands. "That is an unusual name."

"All of our family have unusual names. I always liked her name, and thought she fit right in. We never suspected that she might truly be my sister." Something is wrong. Why is he acting this way? As if he had seen, or heard, a ghost.

"And your name again?"

"I am Tricia."

Fritz's hands shook until he dropped the paper on his desk.

"When did you last see her?"

"When she gave me these things. We were seven. I knew her for seven months of her life, and that is all." Tricia sat down to hide

the tears. She let the tears fall at the sound of the thunder clap. The light over the table shook to the same rhythm as her shoulders. As the tears subsided, she reached for the photos in the box.

"Here are the only pictures I have. See? Even in them, you can't tell us apart unless we stand side by side. I was shorter than her then. Is she still alive?"

Fritz compared the pictures to the women in front of him. "Are there any pictures of your mother's sister?"

Helen stared at her hands in her lap again. "I never knew. We have a suspicion."

Fritz thought a few minutes. He moved the box to the floor, close to the inner door and replaced the contents. "Suspicions aren't enough. Do you have any relatives you don't know well?"

"No. Our grandmother did grow up on the reservation. And some of her cousins went missing during the boarding school years." Tricia said.

"Male or female?"

"Three female, and one male." It was more likely for females to turn up missing. Often, no one looked for them, or reported them missing to families for a year or more.

"Do you know what this girl you think may be your sister's mother looked like?"

"We think we saw her a few times. I don't remember what she looked like."

"Are all of you, and your brother, willing and able to do DNA testing?"

"Yes!" Tricia and Helen both yelled.

Momma nodded.

"Eleanor, you seem quiet compared to your excited daughters. Is there anything you know that they don't?"

She looked up at him, and fiddled with a few papers she held. "No sir. I guess I feel the burden is on me, as one child is my daughter, and the other my sister. After the recent death of my mother, and suddenly to find that I have an unknown sister and daughter, it is overwhelming to me."

"Do you remember Mistie?"

"I saw her a few times. She looked so like my daughter, I wanted to take her home. No one would have known, and her life

would have been far better! We don't know much. Only that she was, even as a young child, afraid to go home at night. Why didn't I do something? Did I condemn my unknown daughter to a life of fear? Did her mind even survive if her body did?" Tears streamed down her cheeks unchecked as grief wracked her body.

"Momma, what could you have done? There was no way to save her then. The law gave her to the people who had her. There was nothing you could do. Only in our ancestor's time could you have done anything."

Fritz glanced at the papers in her hand. "Will those tell me where you last saw her?"

Momma handed them to him.

"Alright ladies, I have a plan. For a small retainer fee, I will begin the process by researching where she was last seen, this book by the baby seller, and the known records of the hospital and school involved. As soon as you have the DNA tests results. Better, let me give you a letter for expediting the process and have them sent to me as soon as they are complete."

Tricia took the papers he handed to her. "I have the notes from the school, here. Please hurry."

Fritz nodded. "It is vital you have this test done in the next week. Please return in two weeks, and bring your brother. I may have to call you sooner." He turned, picked up the box, and stormed into the back room, and slammed the door.

"Um, how much was the retainer fee?" Momma asked.

Tricia reached for her mother's shoulder. "He never said, or asked for a check. I guess we find out in two weeks. I'll drive home. Come on Momma."

The inner door opened. "Wait. I need a family picture to compare with the people I find." He snapped the picture as they turned back. The door slammed shut again.

Helen almost laughed through her tears. "Odd fellow. I hope he finds them soon."

Chapter 25

Mistie Prepares for Trial - Age 22

Mistie walked across the base yard. Something out of the corner of her eye startled her. A shadow, really. Nothing to be scared of. Jumpy, she turned the key to her door.

"Mistie!"

The security officer who had escorted her to her room when she arrived several months before hurried toward her.

Mistie hadn't been able to remember her name.

The guard handed her a sheet of paper. "People have been looking for you. Are you okay?" Worry lines etched on the young guard's face.

"Sure. What is it?"

"I don't know. Have to report back to the office." The security guard backed up and waited.

Mistie turned and walked into her room.

After she closed her door, the security guard hurried back to the main gate.

Mistie sighed and turned to sit at her table. The answering machine beeped like a strobe light. Seven messages. She hadn't been gone that long, had she? No one ever called. Well, it could be Justin or Emma. Or even Joan.

The first three were from Fritz to contact him at once. The next message was from Justin to call him. The fifth message was from Emma, who wanted to know how she was. The last two were from Joan and Trudy to call her immediately, before eating dinner even.

She sighed again as she sat to look at the paper in her hand. "What could be so important?"

The page was a poorly faxed copy, barely readable. Surely, the army could afford a better fax machine, or maybe the sender's machine was that bad.

The letter dropped from her hand to the desk. The impact of the words struck her. Fritz had demanded two things, one that she have a security guard near her at all times. And two, that she and Justin meet with him and a lawyer regarding the case.

What could she say? She really didn't want to meet with him. She wanted to move on with her life, not wallow in the nightmares of a past she had worked so hard to forget. In fact, two weeks ago she had finished what she had hoped would be her last self-hypnosis session.

A knock sounded at the door.

Mistie stood up, and half in a dream opened the door.

Joan and Trudy rushed in.

Trudy closed, and locked the door behind them.

"You didn't call us." Trudy said.

"I've only been back a few minutes. We ended class late today." Reading faces was something she had never been good at.

Joan handed her another paper. "Mistie, what will you do? We will help you any way we can."

Mistie took the page. On it was a clear pass from her commanding officer to comply with Fritz's requests, regardless of length of time involved. Her cheeks felt warm as she glanced back to Joan and Trudy. How much did her commanding officer know? She turned to sit on her bed.

"I don't want to stay back there, in the past. I want to move on."

Trudy placed her hand on Mistie's shoulder. "I know. It's wrong to force you to go back there. You are needed though, to help others. We will be here to help you through, and after the trial."

"I had hoped my spoken testimony would be all that was needed."

"We hoped so too." Trudy didn't move.

The hand that should have been comforting wasn't. A fear, a deep fear permeated through her memory, interrupting her present again.

The phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Mistie! You finally answered. This is Fritz. It is vital I meet with you soon. We have many case details to go over."

"I've only been in a few minutes Fritz. When and where do we need to meet?" She looked at the paper in her hand, and up at Joan.

"How about tomorrow at 3:00 in the same room you met with Cal and Merlish a few months ago?"

"I'm not sure it will be available. I am in class until 4:00."

"It's available. I've already checked. Your commanding officer should be sending you a letter to verify."

The paper in her hands verified it. She wasn't sure. She glanced at Joan.

"We are coming with you," Joan said.

"Only if my friends Joan and Trudy can come also."

A moment of silence. "Okay. They may come, Justin and his mother will also be there." The phone hung up with a soft click.

Mistie turned and sat back on the bed. "If Justin and Emma are coming too, there is no way to call them. They will be on their way. I'll call. To say I did."

Joan and Trudy waited while Mistie called to leave a message for Justin and Emma. Then, she searched for her phone list to call her commanding officer to determine how the lost time to various aspects of the case and upcoming trial would affect her status.

"How much do you know that I don't know?"

"Nothing. Fritz called mom a few hours ago. He is worried about your safety. Not sure what he and Mr. Gleam know." Joan pushed the papers toward the desk.

"Or think they know." Trudy relaxed. "Be careful. Join us for dinner?"

"Sure. Let me change into causal clothes."

Joan and Trudy stepped outside while she changed.

It gave her a few minutes to think. This living in fear again. Fear every moment. The base wasn't giving her the freedom from the pain and the fear as it once had. Somehow, it had followed her here. And others sensed the danger. It had been hidden so well, for so long. She wanted it gone. Gone forever. It wouldn't go.

They were all silent as they ate. After all the excitement, there wasn't much to say until they knew more. That wouldn't happen for nearly twenty-four hours, or more.

Mistie went to class the next day. She left early, at second break so as not to disturb anyone else. After dropping off her notes in her room, she prepared mentally, as best as she could for the

upcoming meeting. She had no idea what she could say, or do, to help the trial that hadn't already been said.

Joan and Trudy walked with her to the meeting room.

Her last meeting here had been that first meeting with Cal and Merlish. Not one she wanted to remember.

Justin and Emma were already waiting.

After Mistie introduced everyone, they all sat silently waiting for Fritz.

Fritz arrived carrying a box.

Justin reached to help him, as a second man walked in.

"Hi everyone. I am Mr. Gleam, the attorney in this case." He closed the door behind him.

Fritz set up the tape recorder.

Mistie's hands shook. She sat in the middle of one side of the table. Justin on one side of her, and Joan on the other side.

Fritz sat at one end to work the machine.

Mr. Gleam sat across from her, with a small box and a pad of paper beside him.

The tape recorder clicked on.

"I am sorry. We will have to video tape this as well." Mr. Gleam marked a spot on the paper.

Fritz turned on a tabletop video camera, and pointed it at Mr. Gleam.

"This will not be easy. Let's start with a few quick introductions."

Trudy introduced herself as a self-esteem counselor.

Mr. Gleam nodded at that and made a note on his page.

Joan identified herself as a drug abuse expert.

Mr. Gleam smiled and made another note on his page.

Justin introduced himself as studying to be an army doctor.

Mr. Gleam nodded.

Emma introduced herself as Mistie's friend and Justin's mom.

After introductions, Mr. Gleam glanced at Mistie again. "Mistie, I know this is hard on you. We need your help. However, Liza, Cal, and Merlish do not need to know about the aspects discussed today. Honestly, it won't help them, their cases, or even the bigger case for them to be fully aware at this point the gravity of the crimes these people committed. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Mistie rubbed her right hand over her left.

"I have listened to your tape from your previous meeting, and feel you can help us. What these people did in the twin study wasn't their only serious crime against children."

He waited a few moments for that to sink in.

Mr. Gleam lifted the lid of the box beside him. "We realize you do not want to know anything else. However, they not only had the twin study going on, they also had another 'study' of their own. We are not sure which began first, or if they purposely joined them."

A lump formed in her throat. She couldn't swallow.

He pulled a few pictures from the box and sat them on the table in front of her. Pictures of giant stuffed animals. Almost life sized bear cubs, tigers, lions, and even a giraffe. "Do you recognize these?"

Mistie frowned. Those animals. There had been a whole room full of them. They stunk. They always had. She reached for the lion picture. "Yes."

"Tell me about them."

Mr. Gleam took the pictures away.

The video camera was pointed right at her. She shivered. "I didn't like them. I stayed away from them. In fact, I generally don't like stuffed animals of any size."

"Do you remember anything about them?"

She looked straight at him. "No sir. I've seen pictures of children playing on them, riding them as if they were hoses."

"Do you remember anything from the ages of four to eight?" Mr. Gleam pushed the pictures back into an envelope.

"No, only the recurring nightmare dream."

"Tell me about it?"

The familiar trancelike state turned on. "I would wake up and my skin would be black. All my skin would have to peel off while I screamed. Maybe it was dried mud. My hair was beautiful. Long, straight, black, and tied back in a simple style."

She reached as if to touch the invisible locks. "It all fell out. My hair grew out this ugly dirty color."

Mistie looked across at Mr. Gleam. "That's all I remember."

Mr. Gleam made notes. "There are more pictures. I can't show them to you now. This investigation has been going on for several

months now. It will continue for months, if not years before the trial. I will show you a few more pictures."

These pictures were of her mother and brother, as well as her mother's parents. None were flattering. One picture showed the house where her mother was found when she was arrested. Even handcuffed in the picture, she clutched a pill bottle. Clutter and garbage littered the house and yard. The shriveled body of a cat sprawled on the porch. Much of the fur was gone, and parts of the skeleton poked out of holes.

Justin squeezed her hand.

Mr. Gleam pulled out more pictures.

Many of the pictures were glossy. Some had strange stains on them. Pictures of the ocean, with children playing on the beach. A picture of a child on a swing high in the air. Even a picture of a child in a bathtub.

Mistie shivered and drew closer to Justin.

Mr. Gleam showed her more pictures. "Is the bathtub photo disturbing?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"A disturbing fad, that would have the film owners arrested today."

"Were there many taken?"

"Yes. Photos of kids in tubs and pools were common for a year or two. Most parents meant nothing by them. Thought it was a matter of pride to show off their child." Mr. Gleam watched her.

"The year this photo was taken?"

"During that time." He pushed the photo back into the pile. "Do you know who the child is?"

She glanced at him. "It could be anyone. I don't want to see it."

It was all a daze to her. That warm, dizzy feeling kept it from feeling real.

He placed the last pictures back into the box. "Thank you for helping. That will be all for now. We may contact you again if we find more evidence."

She nodded, and leaned closer to Justin.

"Justin, I have spoken with you already," Mr. Gleam said. "You and Emma may help Mistie back to her room, and return here."

Justin stood up, and helped Mistie to stand.

Joan reached out her hand.

"Joan and Trudy, will you please stay? I have a few questions to ask you as well."

They agreed to stay.

Mistie didn't remember being led back to her room by Justin. He stayed with her for a few minutes. She didn't hear anything he said, or remember anything he did.

A warm cup was placed in her hand.

Emma stood behind it, her eyes brimmed with tears.

It was warm tea. A few sips later, and she was able to rest, with her head on Emma's shoulder. She had no idea what the next day would bring.

Justin returned.

She didn't know what time it was.

He left.

Emma stayed beside her, holding her hand.

Chapter 26

Mr. Gleam, Fritz, and Team - Forever Young - Year 23

Merlish unlocked the door to the warehouse again. He sighed as he turned on the lights. He had hoped to be retired by now. Resting, and writing the book that compared all of the twin studies. It had sounded so easy. Even though others told him the writing would be the longest and hardest part.

The door slammed behind him.

He walked to the round table, left waiting for him. The file in his hands was from Mistie's DNA testing.

The door closed gently.

Cal carried in food and coffee. He sat down. Not a word was said. There was nothing to say, until Fritz arrived.

The door slammed again. Fritz walked in the room with a bag in his hands. He walked up to the table and sat down. The bag he placed in front of him. "Well, some good news. Enough evidence has been found that they have been arrested and a trial date set."

"Mr. Gleam let us know," Merlish said.

Fritz reached into the bag. "Let's go over these test results. The girls do match, as you have them listed, as either fraternal, or identical. The mothers are not directly linked by DNA. Their DNA though not related, is rather similar. They all share an unusual marker. Not sure if that matters."

"We have Mistie's here. Can you read the DNA information?" Merlish handed the file to Fritz.

"If they did it right, I can." He opened the file and carefully compared it to the cover sheet on his files. "They are related, but not full sisters."

Merlish sat back. "What now?"

Fritz rustled the pages and pulled out another file. He let out a long, low whistle. "A match. A direct, identical, match. Too much of a coincidence."

"What do you mean?" Merlish asked.

"At this point, all I can say is that your legal case is entangled with the personal case of another client of mine. Do you have copies of Mistie's DNA results?"

Merlish nodded.

"Then, I must be going. Here are copies of the other girl's reports. Mr. Gleam has all the evidence he needs for now." With that, he stuffed Mistie's folder, and an unmarked folder back into the bag, and ran out of the building.

Merlish and Cal sat in the now quiet building. "Well, Cal, I guess now we need to consult with Mr. Gleam. I'll set something up soon."

A few days later, Merlish and Cal waited at the round table again. The silence was broken only by the slow drip of the coffee pot. Merlish's pencil tapped. His fingers shook while reading the files again. What could have gone wrong? What could they have done differently?

The door opened and Mr. Gleam walked in. "Hi, hope everyone is here." His voice echoed as he strode towards them.

Cal spoke up, "Liza will be here in a few minutes. We wanted to ask a question or two before she arrived."

Mr. Gleam sat down, and pulled out a packet of papers, which he sat in front of them. "Well, I'd rather not answer something twice. Go ahead, and ask, I'll decide."

"Liza is extremely sensitive about this. We aren't sure why she is so sensitive."

Mr. Gleam waited a few moments, then looked straight at Cal. "One of the mothers is an old school friend of hers. Fritz found out recently when he talked to her alone about the case. He had to know her experience more in-depth from her. She had the most contact with the girls, and should have with the mothers as well, according to the study recommendations."

The door banged as Liza entered. She looked at the table, turned and locked the door, then ambled towards them. Her face was pale. "Good afternoon."

Merlish nodded to her. "Glad you are here. Mr. Gleam, are we legally responsible? Morally, yes, though we had no idea."

Mr. Gleam sighed. "It's complicated. Morally, you hold yourselves responsible. I don't think you are. You had no way to

know. This man used an assumed name, Adam Jolin, so he couldn't be traced. You had no reason to distrust him, as it wouldn't show up in criminal background check reports."

Everyone watched him closely as he marked dots on his page.

"Secondly, your records state you had no idea he was married. You either assumed the egg donor was a young wife, or friend, or something. You never clearly state in your records. However, you have the clear record that she claimed she was not related to the man, and gave her full legal consent to the use of her eggs and his sperm."

Another bubble filled in.

Merlish listened. Mostly right. He should have known something wasn't right. Egg harvesting, and practical twin studies were new then. It had been "the cutting edge of technology" at the time. A rush to be the first to begin and end a 20-year study.

"A few years into the experiment, you chose to add Liza to follow the girls. More for propriety's sake than anything. I, and any court, would applaud that decision." Mr. Gleam marked another bubble.

"If not, you personally may have begun to notice some of the issues sooner. Possibly not, though. You knew the women before they became mothers, even if only for a short while. You might have noticed the downhill slide." Mr. Gleam looked at each of them in turn.

"In reality, you did not begin to suspect anything until late. Liza was unable to get your attention, because the erratic behavior could be considered consistent with their age."

Another bubble filled in. Only a few lines left.

"Once you realized there was a problem, you began to determine if it was real, or imaginary, without damaging your experiment. Totally logical, as the girls did not know they were part of an experiment, and the mothers may have forgotten."

A bubble filled in. Only one more to go.

"You did the best you could. The only question is; will the court see it as enough? Honestly we have no way to know."

Merlish's voice shook. "Could we have saved Brandy? Are we guilty of her death?"

Mr. Gleam glanced his way. "In my opinion, no. You had set the wheels well in motion by that time. You only had suspicions, no accurate facts. Even so, unless you had the girls arrested, you could not have kept them safe at that point."

Merlish did not feel any better with this news.

Cal handed him a cup of coffee.

"One last thing. Your clients have been arrested, and a trial date is set. I have not told you all of their crimes, nor will I. They are too numerous. Without your help, these criminals would still be free." Mr. Gleam turned the page over.

"Will we have to go to trial?" Liza asked.

Mr. Gleam nodded. "You will be required to give evidence at the trial of your former client."

"Yes. Will we be on trial?"

"I am afraid you will have to each attend a hearing to determine if you should go on trial. The court, and the public will want to know you did everything as soon as you could. As soon as you knew there was a problem."

"We tried." Merlish closed his eyes. Too little. Too late. Too many lives ruined forever.

"I believe you, and think the court will too. Sure. You might could have called me ten minutes sooner. We would be where we are now at this time today, with nothing changed. You needed evidence first. I have more than you do now, thanks to your start."

"Will we see all of your evidence?"

"No. Not at this point."

"If we don't know their other crimes, how can we testify against them completely?" Merlish said.

Mr. Gleam nodded. "Anything you say will be another nail in the coffin. Don't worry about it. You will witness the trials. Any more knowledge now will not help you prepare for the coming trials."

Liza sat her cup down. "I am sure it can't be any worse than my nightmares."

Mr. Gleam glanced over at her. "Don't be so sure. Don't think about it. Don't worry."

"Do you think we are safe? Are the girls safe from them?" Cal sat his cup down.

Mr. Gleam fiddled with the papers in his hands. "We hope so. We aren't sure. There have been reports, reliable reports, that Mistie may be being followed."

He looked up at each one of them. "The following may stop now that your clients have been arrested."

"Is she safe?" Liza said.

"We hope so. She, and the other girls, each of you, and several other families will be under protection in a safe hotel during the entire series of trials. Any more questions?"

No one said anything.

"Well, then I will see each of you in court. Don't worry, you did all you could." Mr. Gleam glanced at each of them, gathered his papers, and left the building.

"I feel like we know less than we did when he arrived," Liza said.

"He's right. We can't know what else they've done if we want to keep our testimony straight," Cal said.

"I feel like we've lost everything we ever worked for." Merlish picked up the paper in front of him.

"We have the results of the other studies." Cal pushed in his chair. "No one can dispute that."

"I hope it is enough." Merlish walked to his office. There was nothing hidden here. Never had been any secrets in here. Of his own making anyway. How many secrets had his client made? Secrets that threatened to destroy his life's work? His dream. The ruined promise he had made to his now dead wife, that they would retire to a warm and sunny climate.

Chapter 27

Family DNA Test - Age 22

Tricia and her families' trip the to the medical center for the DNA testing was uneventful. A quiet, sunny day, not a cloud in the sky.

Quin parked the car. He was the first to the receptionist desk, and handed her his paper. He was only gone a few moments. When he returned, he patted Helen on the back.

She had gone into the back room. She wasn't gone long.

Mom stood slowly, squared her shoulders, and followed the nurse. She returned with a slight smile on her face.

Tricia stood and walked back, not sure how confident she was. It was a simple test. The nurse checked her temperature and blood pressure, for the record. Then, she pulled a few strands of hair from Tricia's scalp.

"Next a skin scraping from your leg, it may sting." The nurse scrubbed a spot below her knee with an alcohol-based pad. She used a razor blade to pull off a few pieces of skin.

Tricia bared her teeth, and thought about how much worse pain her missing sister had likely been through.

"Is that all?" She asked.

"You are the twin, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then, one more test. A drop of blood to verify. Three tests to be sure and rule out any contamination problems with the other samples."

The nurse scrubbed her finger prior to the stick. Nothing more than the usual stick used to check for blood sugar. It hurt more than she imagined as the nurse squeezed her finger, and the tiny drop of blood entered the tube.

They had gone to their favorite restaurant, both to celebrate, and to keep their minds busy while they waited for the results.

"Of course, We could find none of us are related at all." Helen laughed.

Quin ruffled Helen's hair, and quickly changed the subject. "We won't know anything for at least a week, and it could be months, depending on how backed up the lab is."

Days passed. Everyone jumping when the phone rang. Or raced to check the mail before it was fully in the mailbox.

The phone finally rang. Fritz wanted a meeting with all four of them tonight.

Momma entered the living room and Tricia sat beside her. She was visibly shaking, and her clothes were far looser than when Gramma was alive. She sat down, and reached her hand into Tricia's. Not a word was said.

Quin walked in next, dressed up for the occasion, and waited quietly, fiddling with his buttons.

The time to leave came.

Quin stood up to look for Helen.

She ran through the door, flushed more than usual. "I'm ready. Let me grab a paper." She ran to her bedroom and back.

Quin pulled the car up in front of the imposing building.

No storm or cloud in the sky.

He helped Momma out, and up the stairs.

She hesitated every other step, as if unsure if she could manage all the steps.

Helen bounded up them, as if they were building blocks, and beckoned her mother to hurry.

Tricia walked behind, worried about her mother, and curious about her sister.

Quin glanced back at her. "No idea what she is doing."

Helen raced in into the building out of sight.

By the time Tricia reached the door, she was no longer in the hallway.

They walked slowly down the hall. Momma stopped and placed her hand on the wall beside the door, both to steady herself, and catch her breath.

Quin opened the door and held it for her.

Tricia walked in behind.

Helen was already seated, and waited for them.

Beside Fritz, another man was in the room.

Fritz looked up. "Hi. Mr. Gleam has joined us. He is a lawyer, and will explain things far better than I can." He studied his papers again.

Momma sat down with Quin beside her, and Tricia next to Helen.

"This will not be easy to explain." Mr. Gleam said.

Fritz pushed the baby doctor book towards him.

"The case is more complex than this book." Mr. Gleam picked up the book, and sifted through the pages. "We have no evidence that he knew who he sold babies to. In fact, I doubt he did. Or he would have found a way to sell more."

Mr. Gleam sat the book down. "We think we know where the younger missing sister is. We suspect we know where the older one is as well. DNA matches for the younger sister are positive."

A sigh of relief passed through the room.

Momma clutched the chair arms, as if she would fall.

"Honestly, I am not sure how much to tell you."

"When can we see Mistie!" Helen jumped up from her chair. "If you know where she is, don't keep her from us."

Mr. Gleam smiled. "A little spitfire is nice in this case. The last few weeks. I can't tell you about that. It will be awhile before Mistie can know about you."

Momma slumped down in the chair, and hid her face behind her arms.

"Why?" Quin said.

"If she were only a sold baby, we could allow a reunion much sooner. However, this case is far more complex than that. She needs all her strength and energy to focus on helping us bring to justice the people who hurt her, you, and many, many, other people."

Fritz made a noise.

Tricia leaned forward, and gripped her chair. "Is she safe? She is alive? Will she be okay?"

"She is as healthy in mind, body, and spirit as can be expected in the circumstances. I promise you, as soon as we can have this reunion, we will."

"Mr. Gleam?" Quin said.

"Yes?"

"Will you let us know what is going on. How soon?"

"Well, there are four separate major cases to work through, and three minor ones."

Whistles filled the room.

Mr. Gleam waited.

"Is Mistie in legal trouble?"

"No. She is not. She is helping us." Fritz shifted a few pages in front of him.

Mr. Gleam turned over the page in his hand. "I told you it was complex. Trials can be postponed, almost indefinitely at times. Especially if you are the family waiting on pins and needles. I promise. I, or Fritz, my assistant in this case series, will call you once a week, and give you know any updates."

Helen looked back out over her arms. "Then we four are all definitely family?"

Fritz and Mr. Gleam laughed. "Yes, did you wish not to be, or not to find the missing sister?"

"I like my family as it is, and would gladly share with another sister. Then, we would be even numbered."

Laughter filled the room.

Tricia watched Mr. Gleam. He was hiding something, but what.

He glanced at his watch. "Yes, Tricia, I am hiding something. I can see what you are thinking. I am concerned about you and your family's safety. Your meeting tonight is as far as I dare push this. I will not meet with you again. It isn't safe. We don't know anything for sure, and will keep your sister, and many others, under close observation."

Mr. Gleam looked at each of them. "If you ever feel you are being followed, immediately call Fritz or myself."

He looked around at each of them again. "Don't let five minutes go by without calling. While we cannot be sure, your lives may depend on it."

"Are we in danger, sir?" Quin asked.

Mr. Gleam looked up. "We hope not. We cannot be sure. Remember these people that stole your sisters are dangerous. That is all I can say now."

Helen's lip trembled. "Is Mistie in danger?"

"She is almost as much of a spit fire as you, young lady. I think not. She is aware of her surroundings. She will be closely guarded."

"Why would someone follow her?" Helen said.

Mr. Gleam glanced to Fritz who had been quietly listening.

"Mistie escaped. She didn't return with more people for these people to hurt. We fear they may have someone watching her, trying to use fear to force her to return."

"If she's anything like me, she won't be afraid."

"Sometimes it's those who aren't afraid who are in the most danger." Fritz looked at their faces. "We have no proof, only multiple people's suspicions. As long as she is careful and stays with friends, she will be safe. Have a good evening."

Fritz stood up and walked into the inner room.

Mr. Gleam stood up to walk out with the family.

Helen, normally chatty, hung behind to speak with Mr. Gleam.

Tricia and Quin helped Momma up and out the door.

Tricia had never worried about being followed before. Now, she would watch every shadow, and wonder if someone was watching her. What if the person following Mistie, had found her instead, and she had not been warned to be aware? She shivered as she realized the danger. Sure, the person could kill her, but there were things far worse than being dead.

Chapter 28

Mistie Faces her Fears

Mistie wasn't ready for court. The donut shop across the street would be a good place to wait. From there, she could watch as people filed up the courthouse steps.

How many steps was it? Like a Mayan pyramid, small thin steps led to the sun. People at the top looked like ants heading into the temple of the gods. How many would come out alive?

She glanced at her watch. It was time to go and face her past.

The past she didn't remember. And wanted to leave in the realm of the forgotten.

Outside the courtroom, people pushed and shoved past her for seats. All these faceless people wanted to be in the back row. Spectators at a trial that would harm many as it dredged up events best buried.

I wish I had decided to come early with the lawyers.

People pushed and shoved.

She let the crowd propel her forward, until they had filled the back rows.

With no one pushing her, she had to find the strength to hold her head up, and walk forward, to the three rows reserved for victims. People stared, as they saw her. Dressed up, and striding forward. True pride and life in her footsteps. Many whispered as she passed.

"She must be one of the lawyers."

"How can she be so sure of herself?"

"Pride goes before a fall."

The rustling voices did not affect her. She walked purposely forward to the front row, not even looking at the full back two rows. The aisle seat was empty. The guilty would be forced to walk right by her. How would they feel? What would they do?

Mr. Gleam had said to sit in the front row. The victim's rows were full of women. Some her age, some older, and few were far younger. Even a few boys were there. All dressed in little better than rags. A woman who could have been Tammy sat in the row behind her. Others vaguely resembled the pictures Mr. Fritz had

shown her. They clung to the older women beside them. Even those with an infant in their own lap. As if they couldn't sit up without assistance.

At last, the room quieted. Everyone stood as the judge walked into the room from a door beside his bench. As he sat down, so did the spectators.

Mistie remained standing and watched the back door. Others beside followed her lead and stood, and faced the back doors as the criminals were led to face charges.

The first one arrived with three guards.

She blinked. No feelings for this man, who had once been her brother. Nothing. Even less than she would have felt for a stranger. Or one of the beggar boys behind her.

The young man appeared too young to be part of the ring. As he reached the spot where he was to stand in front of the judge's bench, the guards stepped aside enough so the crowds would see his face.

"Blake Jolin you have been charged with drug possession, manufacturing, incest, and knowingly contributing and participating in a child porn and sex slave ring. How do you plead?" The judge read the list.

Mistie covered her eyes. How could the young man she had called brother be responsible for so many crimes without her knowing it?

"How do you plead?"

"Not guilty."

"Do you have a lawyer? One can be appointed by the court."

"Yes."

"Yes, you have a lawyer, or yes, you need one?"

"Yes, I have one appointed by the court."

"Your case will be heard after the holiday break."

He turned and was ushered out of the courtroom.

There was a moment's silence.

A fluttering of voices from the back rows began.

One guard held the door open.

Another pushed a wheelchair.

The dilapidated body frame in the chair had wasted away to almost nothing. Bones poked through her shirt. Her hair looked as if

it hadn't been washed in years. She was positioned in front of the judge.

Nothing. Or almost nothing. This woman had been her mother. There were no feelings of joy, or even anger at her sight. Only an emptiness. A memory of Emma and Trudy intruded on the emptiness, filling it with light and hope.

"Patricia Jolin, you have been charged with drug possession, drug manufacture, abuse of prescription drugs, knowingly, and unknowingly participating in a child porn and child sex ring. How do you plead?"

No sound escaped her. Her head hung down to her chest.

A lawyer from the defendant's bench spoke up. "Not guilty sir."

"Are you her lawyer?"

"Yes sir. My client is ill."

"Her trial will begin as soon as her son's trial is over." He waved his hand to dismiss her.

As the guards turned the woman's chair, she glanced up and saw Mistie.

The stare was apparent. What did it mean? She had no feeling for this woman. Who had been her mother. By law, anyway. Not by action. Or attitude.

Three guards brought in the next defendant.

She appeared to be a doddering old woman, who toddled behind a walker. Gasps of shock echoed from the crowds behind her. No one would expect a crime from a woman who could barely walk.

Her own feelings, however, were rather tumultuous. Sweat dripped off Mistie's hands and face. Fear likely radiated from eyes. The haunted, hunted, feeling returned. She swallowed as the walker reached her.

As she passed Mistie, the elderly woman turned and faced her. "Do you feel better now?"

The guards waited a few seconds before they pushed her onward to the judge's bench.

"Melanie Haulin you have been charged with drug possession, manufacturing, incest, buying and selling of babies, and knowingly contributing to, and participating in a child porn and sex slave ring. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty. How could I do such a thing? I can't even stand up on my own."

"Do you have a lawyer? One can be appointed by the court."

"Yes. I have a lawyer. He will protect me and my family."

"Your trial will begin after your daughter's trial is complete. Until then, you will remain in prison."

She refused to move. The woman stared at the judge.

"You may go. The guards will help you back to prison."

"Can you not see? I am too old and sick to be in prison. It will kill me."

The judge waved his hand. He studied the reports on her case.

The guards gently, and forcibly, turned her walker around and assisted her to the door.

She passed Mistie. "I hope you are happy."

Mistie shivered. Her eyes closed of their own accord. Seeing her after all this time was too much. Would seeing the one she had called grandfather break her resolve to stand on her own?

There was a pause as the judge glanced through more paperwork.

"Last case before break. Bring him in."

The door opened. Two guards entered.

Behind them was a tall, elderly man with his hands chained behind his back.

Behind him walked two more guards. Two more on standstill, hands on their guns at the door. As they approached the victim's rows, one guard stepped back to block this man from seeing who was in the rows.

As the man approached the bench, he turned to stare at his victims.

"Look this way." The judge lifted his arm.

An extra guard moved behind the man.

The man turned back.

"Colby Haulin you have been charged with drug possession, manufacturing, incest, buying and selling of babies, and knowingly running, contributing to, and participating in a child porn and sex slave ring." The list continued on as the lawyer flipped pages of documents. "How do you plead?"

"Not guilty."

"Do you have a lawyer? One can be appointed by the court."

"Yes. I have a lawyer."

"You may go. Your trial will begin after your wife's trial. You will remain in prison. They will keep you in solitary confinement for your safety. There are many who will gladly kill you for your crimes."

The elderly man turned to walk out of the room, with his head high in defiance.

The guards watched him closely. They also watched the observers; to guarantee no one would attempt to assassinate him before he was convicted.

The judge placed his hands in front of him on the papers before he looked across the courtroom. "All media will be required to be five rows behind the victims at all times during the trials. You will not be allowed to follow victims out of the courtroom. You will respect their right to say "no" to an interview. If you do not respect them, you will be barred from this courtroom for the length of these four proceedings. And potentially any such trial again." He glanced at the middle rows.

"All other observers are to respect the rights of the victims as well. Disorderly conduct will have you removed and barred for the length of the proceedings. The victims and lawyers will please stay a few moments while the observers and media file out calmly and quietly."

The media and observers did file out. Though not particularly calmly and quietly. Many disembodied snatches of conversation reached the front of the courtroom.

"Can you believe his nerve?"

"Have you read what they did to children?"

"How many victims are afraid, or ashamed to be here?"

"How many didn't survive at all?"

The courtroom was quiet as the last stragglers stepped out of the room. In a few seconds, the doors popped close, and it sounded like a tomb as even the air in the room echoed.

"I know some of you know each other. Others do not. I don't expect you to become friends. We will provide a safe place for you to eat lunches together during the proceedings away from prying eyes and ears. The room is down the hall, through the side door on the left. You may enter and exit there. Several tables and chairs

have been provided. You may request more chairs if needed. Coffee, tea, and a small fridge will also be provided."

The judge stood up to leave the room. "If you need anything, please ask your lawyer, and the request will be forwarded directly to me. I hope you will spend a few moments saying hello and finding other mutual understandings. Not only the nightmares you have survived."

Mistie turned and viewed the others in the three victim's rows. What she saw looked like stereotypical victims. They seemed sad, unable to raise their faces level. Their clothes looked tattered, almost too tattered even for a consignment shop. She hoped there was life and hope for them, like there had been for her. She still had dreams. They had changed. Now, she was looking for new ones.

"Mistie," Mr. Gleam walked up behind her. "I know you meant well, and wanted to prove there was hope. Some here have succeeded somewhat, though none as well as you. The jury will trust them more if they appear as they expect. Don't judge them yourself."

"I don't. Dressing and acting for success can lead to success."

"They are looking for success in the courtroom. They will receive it, dressed as the jury expects to see victims. You will have to remember all those nightmares you have forgotten to be able to help bring the perpetrators to justice."

"How will they believe my testimony if I dress and act depressed? Won't that make that testimony unreliable and appear to be vengeance?"

"No. It will give all the more reason for the jury to feel sorry for you."

"I didn't remember all this. It is locked away. I worked hard to recover, and don't feel reliving it is wise, or healthy for me. I don't want people feeling sorry for me either."

"It doesn't matter. Let people make the connections they make."

"Lies, and half-truths are twin sisters." Mistie walked to the exit.

"She has the strength of an eagle." Mr. Gleam turned to the other victims.

Mistie sat down on the steps to focus on the flurry of the last few months as the trial had come together. She was amazed to be here now, and hoped she would be able to stay for the whole series of

trials. The army had said she could. However, the army were known to change their minds.

Mistie watched for a while, and did not see the other victims come out. She hated being called a victim. Her time with Joan's mother, Trudy, had increased that feeling. Being called a victim would make her more likely to act a victim, and remain a victim. She had no intention of doing so.

Mr. Gleam walked slowly down the steps. "Hi Mistie. How are you?"

"Okay, I guess. I don't think being called a victim is healthy, psychologically. I wish there was a better way."

He sighed and sat down beside her. "I do to. I know you are right. So do most people who are really thinking. However, your sisters, and the other victims have not reached that realization. I have to say; I hope they don't till the trial is over."

Mr. Gleam watched the fluffy clouds on the horizon.

They seemed almost close enough to touch.

"Think of it as acting for now. You have started on the road you know you will travel. You have met a pothole, and must play the role you left behind a bit longer. Watch the others. You may find a way to help them." He stood up and walked away.

Mistie was alone.

Her neck prickled. Time to go back to the safety of the hotel.

Chapter 29

Liza and Merlish Being Watched - Forever Young - Year 23

The television was on in Liza's apartment. There was no sound. She waited every day on news about the trial. There wasn't much work for her to do. Cal found filing, and other things to keep her busy. Not enough to last until the trial.

She had to find a temporary job, something until the trial for income to pay expenses. In fact, the series of trials could last for months. What would she do then? She had some of money saved, not enough. Retirement was a long way off for her.

Liza reached for her coffee cup. Beside it was the paper. She might as well start looking for something. Cal and Merlish could reach her as soon as they had news. Maybe doing something different would be a blessing in disguise. The three of them wouldn't be cooped up in that empty warehouse trying to look busy.

One of the ads was for security officer training. A good fit. A chance to train to improve her self-esteem, and maybe learn to protect Mistie, and the other girls, at the same time. She circled it, and planned to dial the number in the morning.

For now, she called Cal.

"Hi."

"It's Liza. I'll be late tomorrow. You don't need me early do you?"

He hesitated a second. "No Liza. Take as long as you need. May I ask what you are doing?"

"Sure. I am going to apply for a temporary job through the holiday season while we wait. No point in all of us freezing in that big, empty warehouse. You and Merlish can share the smaller office, and not worry about me. I'll be here." She paused for a moment. "I'm not skipping town."

She thought she heard Cal sigh.

"That's fine Liza. Probably a good idea. Let me know if you get it. Might be good for me to take a break from here also."

Liza waited a moment. Should she tell him? "Cal, it's security guard training. They are asking for women. For the women's clothing departments in the mall."

"That's good. The training may come in handy. See you tomorrow afternoon."

The phone clicked off. Cal sounded so distant. He had never been married. He couldn't pull his weight in a simple conversation that wasn't work related.

What about me? Why have I seldom dated since I started this job? Of course, the obvious answer was she was simply too busy tracking down girls. Sometimes, she was tracking down leads late into the night. Would those skills would ever come in handy again?

The following day, she arrived at the Security Officer Training Academy for Women to fill out her application. The truck behind her had followed her from her apartment. Liza grabbed her resume and hurried inside.

The application process was more intense than she remembered any application process being before. However, she had only worked a few part time jobs before this fourteen-year long job she had now. Things were bound to change. What was her reason for leaving? End of contract? Not fully honest. Not a lie either.

If a lie detector test was part of the hiring process, she'd have a lot of explaining to do. Of course, Merlish and Cal had both assured her that if she needed help, to call them at any time.

The panel interviews were tedious and long. It seemed as if the questions were intended to trip her up. Especially the ones about honesty and stealing. How could she be honest enough to be given the job, without breaking her promise to not discuss the case? She really wished she had called Fritz for his advice. Then, again, as flustered as he was, he might not be much help.

A week later, she received the call that she had made the cut, and to report to training the next day. As she listened to the message, she realized she had been holding her breath. Several times now, she had seen the same truck around town that had followed her the day she interviewed.

She mentioned it to Cal and Merlish. They told her not to worry. Of course, an hour later she heard Merlish on the phone saying, "Fritz." When Merlish saw her, he said he had to go, and hung up in a hurry.

Liza enjoyed the self-defense training. It left her sore that night and the next morning. She knew that ever bruise she endured today could be one less bruise for Mistie and the other girls in the future.

She arrived at the warehouse early Saturday. Sore, and tired, and ready to do the work Cal had left for her. Merlish should be here waiting for her.

Instead, that pickup truck was there. Parked with no one visible inside.

Nervously, she waited.

Merlish's car pulled in beside her.

She rolled down the window and pointed to the truck.

He nodded and pointed at her door.

She unlocked the passenger door, and Merlish got in. They hurried back to her apartment, not speaking.

"Call Fritz," Merlish said.

Liza reached for her phone on the table. Fritz's number was written on a card stuffed in the automotive section of the phone book.

"Hello," Fritz answered, with slurred speech.

"Fritz, we are being followed. Merlish is with me."

"Hand the phone to Merlish." Fritz's voice improved to almost normal.

She handed the phone to Merlish.

Merlish responded to Fritz's questions.

"Yes. Yes. No. We could only see the front of the vehicle. No sign of a person in it. Cameras are a possibility, maybe a probability."

"Yes, you can have someone check to be sure the warehouse hasn't been bugged. I don't know about Liza's apartment. They know where she lives, or at least the building."

Liza gasped and covered her mouth. Had they been in here? Maintenance had a key to her apartment. She hadn't noticed

anything missing or disturbed, had she? She glanced around. Something was out of place. She almost pointed, before she remembered her recent training. She gulped.

"Merlish, pest control."

Merlish stared at her, and then glanced where she wouldn't look. "Fritz, now." He hung up the phone.

She grabbed her purse, and they ran out of the building and back to her car.

Merlish took her keys and drove her to Mr. Gleam's office.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. How long had that camera had been hidden on her counter behind the picture frame? How much it had seen? What had it recorded?

Within minutes, Mr. Gleam's car appeared. He appeared sleepy as he walked them into his fancy office.

They sat down quietly, waiting.

Mr. Gleam sat down across from them and waited.

"Why?" Liza asked.

"I have no idea. The only thing I can figure is they know you know where the girls are. They don't know where Mistie or Ashley are."

"You said they were in jail awaiting trial." Merlish leaned forward.

"Your clients are. The thing is; they may have put these trackers on the trail of Mistie and Ashley months ago. You two are easy for them to find, and follow."

"Is Cal safe? Is the warehouse safe?" Merlish asked.

"I don't know. Fritz is sending a special team in to check it and Liza's apartment tonight. They won't be in town before then. We will have the police escort you to the warehouse after it is cleared of bugs, to load all of your paperwork to be carried to a safe location under constant surveillance."

"I won't be able to do any more with it now then?" Merlish leaned back.

"No. For your safety, and the girls." He leaned back and covered his eyes.

"Your apartment will be debugged, and you will be escorted to a safe, undisclosed location, for your safety."

A sob rose in her throat. She covered her mouth with her hand, hoping Mr. Gleam wouldn't see it.

"Liza, I know you were taking self-defense classes. They will help you. We can certainly use your help researching and tracking down information for the rest of the investigation." Mr. Gleam smiled, and folded his hands. "Now, we not only have the investigation of your clients, we now have to discover who is following you, and Mistie, and how to stop them."

"Will Cal go with us?" Liza asked.

Mr. Gleam thought a few minutes. "No. We need someone here to give the semblance of normalcy at the warehouse. Now. Liza, take Merlish back to the warehouse. He needs to go home and pack for a 'fun vacation'. Leave your car there. If the surveillance truck is gone, you will both be picked up in an hour and hid in a safe place all day. If it's there, go inside carefully, and await my phone call with the doors locked."

Liza and Merlish stood up to leave. For all she knew, her car could be bugged too, and put Mr. Gleam in danger as well. She would miss Cal. Most of all, she would miss her apartment and the dreams of a safe haven for the girls and their mothers. Sure, it would never be large enough for them all. Her dream for them was there.

Merlish's smile flattened as he drove carefully back to the warehouse.

The truck was gone.

She would have to wait here. She hoped it wasn't long.

"Be careful." Merlish went back to his car and drove away.

At least he can pack now, though he may be watched while doing so. She wanted to cry. Her life might depend on her being aware of every bit of her surroundings. They wouldn't kill her, would they? They'd never get the information if they killed her first. At the thought of the types of torture she might have to suffer before she spilled the locations of Mistie and Ashley, she shivered.

A car drove up. It was Cal. Mr. Gleam had sent him to pick her up as if it were a normal part of the day's work. She smiled as she left her car to go to whatever safe place Cal had been directed to.

Chapter 30

Tricia and Family Change the Scenery

The room was empty now. No boxes, or phone books lined the walls. Everything she had worked so hard to locate, was now evidence. Evidence for a case she couldn't attend.

Quin knocked at the door. He peered around the corner. "You okay?"

"It's empty now. All of it. Gone to Fritz as evidence. I couldn't keep anything." Tricia squeezed her hands.

"It's not the stuff, is it?"

"No. I am worried about her. How is she? How will she stand the trials? He hasn't told us much. Only that she is alive."

"Would you feel better if we went to see Fritz to obtain copies of some of the papers? Which ones were important?"

"All of them were important. I have no idea which ones I would choose to keep if I could."

Helen walked in without knocking.

Tricia smiled. She couldn't help it. Her baby sister was spoiled. She herself was a baby sister only to Mistie. The sister she missed most of all. Would Mistie let her walk in without knocking?

"What are we going to do? We have a few months to wait patiently."

A hilarious statement from her energetic sister.

"What do you think? What can we do to keep busy?" Tricia smoothed the rumpled quilt.

Helen sat on the floor and tilted her head to the side. She pulled out a packet from behind her. "We need a change of scenery. What do you think?"

Quin took the packet.

Helen was known for her ability to draw, and it hadn't failed her. The front yard of their home was landscaped with new flowers. The big old bushes taken down. Safe and peaceful, with nothing to hide, or hide behind.

He turned the page. The entranceway and living room, painted a soft pastel, with a new carpet, and beach pictures on the walls. A

new light was shown above the kitchen table. The only visible change.

The next page revealed a bedroom, that seemed unreasonably empty and devoid of furniture or color. Tricia looked from the sketch to Helen.

"Why empty? The others look so good."

"We may not be allowed to let Mistie know about us. How can we prepare a bedroom for her, if we don't know her favorite colors and interests?"

"Anymore good ideas?" Tricia took the pages. Would Mistie like the same colors she did?

"Not until you ask Fritz to find out her likes and dislikes. Wouldn't want to give her a tiger bedroom if she is terribly afraid of them. He can tell us, even if he can't tell her why."

"You know, she's right. Quin, we only know a little of her from so long ago. How will she fit into our lives now? We can't make her fit."

"I think Helen has the right idea. Let's go see Fritz, and talk him into giving her a questionnaire, then at least we can stay busy.

Chapter 31

Blake Jolin

Mistie took her lawyer's words to heart. It was wrong to play the part of a victim when she had moved on in life, that is until she had found out the truth. She was a victim, wasn't she? So, why not play the part. Carefully so she could step into a new successful role afterwards.

Mistie arrived early at the courthouse. After being scanned, and having her bags scanned, she went to the victim's conference room. Today, she had dressed sedately. Not too victim like, and not too nice. Simply plain, clean clothes, solid colors. Navy today.

More people entered the room. Older adults, some of whom had been abused by these same people as children. They were better dressed than their children. There was no laughter. Not even from toddlers. People looked down, and shuffled their feet. No sounds normal children make. No playing, no toys in their hands. Those remained piled in a corner. Only blank stares.

When she tried to talk to a few people, they turned away without answering. Parents stared into space. Along one wall were several young women, a few with babies themselves. They must be part of the twin study. She didn't recognize Tammy among them. They didn't look like the pictures Mr. Fritz had shown her. They had aged too much.

When they were called into the courtroom, Mistie followed last, to the seat she wanted. She did not hold her head as high as she would like. She would not bow to those who had harmed her, and so many others.

As soon as the judge entered and sat, it was silent as everyone waited for the judge to re-read the accusation notes.

"Blake Jolin you have been charged with drug possession, manufacturing drugs." The judge stared at Blake. He continued the long list of abuse charges. "How do you plead?"

"Not guilty."

"Who is your lawyer?"

"Mr. Adder."

"Will Mr. Adder please speak his client's case?"

"Yes, sir. My client is accused of drug possession. He does take a few medications as prescribed by a doctor for heart issues." Mr. Adder turned to the jury.

"He is accused of manufacturing drugs. He has no ability, or interest in taking medications at all, so why would he make drugs?" Mr. Adder walked in front of his client.

"He is accused of incest with his mother. Not only is this false, it is disturbing that anyone would bring such charges against a grown adult with another grown adult." The lawyer turned to the jury and waved toward his client.

"He is also accused of knowingly contributing to, and participating in, a child abuse ring. He is barely past childhood himself, why would he abuse other children? These are false accusations for which there is no proof."

The judge checked his papers. "The lawyer for the defense is Mr. Gleam. What evidence do you have against this young adult?"

"Your honor, we have an extensive evidence catalogue. In short review: Blake Jolin was found with several illegal drugs on his person, and in his littered, mostly vacant home. He was charged with drug possession and manufacturing based on the finding of specific drugs, and the materials, recipes, and objects with drug residue in them." Mr. Gleam turned to the jury.

"Blake Jolin is charged with incest with both his mother, which though a personal choice, applies, and with other family relatives. Rape kit analysis will prove his sexual relationships with these women, young, and not so young, willingly provided by them."

Mistie drew in a deep breath. She had been raised as the sister of this young man. Had there been more evidence she didn't know? She attempted to remember those glaring faces she had laughed away. No. They wouldn't focus. They kept shifting.

"Blake Jolin knowingly contributed and participated in an abuse ring. Although he too, is a victim. He is now an adult and has had ample opportunity to escape, rather than to continue to live this way. He has knowingly brought in more victims." Mr. Gleam nodded to the judge.

"The beginning of the case has been heard. If anyone cannot bear to listen, you may leave. No one will hold it against you." The judge waited a few moments.

A slight rustling sound could be heard. No one left.

"Mr. Gleam, you may present your evidence, and call your witnesses."

"Your honor, do you wish to see the case as a whole, or break it up into each charge?"

"As a whole. Simply clarify which charges you are covering."

"Your honor, for the court, here are pictures of the apartment Blake Jolin was found residing in. As you can see, these pictures were taken within moments of his arrest time. Garbage covers the floor. Almost no clothing is found among the food wrappers, a broken mattress, drug bottles strewn across the floor, and containers with powdery residue."

Mr. Gleam turned to face the observers. "How normal is it to live in a place with no furniture, clothes, or source of food?"

After scanning the room, he turned back to the judge. "Judge I call my first witness, an expert with substance abuse."

Joan Argyle approached the witness stand.

Blake Jolin slumped down in his seat. He refused to look up, hiding his face almost under the defense table.

"Ms. Argyle, in your expert opinion, what substance is in these containers?" Mr. Gleam asked as he held the photos up to the witness, showing them again to the judge and jury.

"Do you have the actual containers? I can point out exactly what was in each from my notes."

"Certainly," Mr. Gleam waved to his assistant who brought a box full of containers to a small table in front of the judges' stand.

"May I step down, and show each container specifically?" The witness asked the judge.

"Yes."

The witness verified ten illegal drugs and one unknown substance in each of these bottles, none of which had contained food.

Had those been there that day she had helped her mother clean, the last time she had ever spoken to her? Mistie closed her eyes. None of those items were familiar. Although, when Joan

talked about the odor that originally came from a few of the bottles, those words sparked a cloudy memory. She pulled out a piece of paper and a pen to make note to give to Mr. Gleam.

"Does the defense have any questions for this witness?" The judge glanced at his papers.

Mr. Adder stood and walked slowly towards the witness. He stopped in front of the small evidence table, almost in Joan's face. "Are you sure you know that these chemical combinations can only be in these drug combinations, and not in any other known or unknown substances?"

"Mr. Adder, my self-knowledge is extensive. This has been verified by multiple researchers studying every known molecular combination for known substances, as well as verified by extensive research though paper archives."

"Do you believe there are unknown substances these combinations could be?"

"While that may be possible, it is highly unlikely. If this young man were working on that kind of science, he would be working with a known scientific lab with funding, not unemployed."

Mr. Adder rocked on his feet. He glanced to the jury, the courtroom at large, and back to the witness. "Many now famous scientists worked alone without funding to create nearly all the conveniences we now have."

"While that may be true, Mr. Adder, we know that those inventors had some known source of food, clothing, and a safe roof over their head."

"No more questions at this time." Mr. Adder returned to his seat.

"Mr. Gleam you may call your next witness."

"Thank you, your honor. The prosecution now calls the arresting officer to the stand."

As soon as the officer settled on the stand Mr. Gleam began the questions. "Sir, what condition was this man in when you entered his apartment?"

"He was passed out on the floor. His mother opened the door, then also passed out on the floor. The home had no furniture, and was so smoky, you couldn't see more than a foot in front of you."

"Sir, this smoke is not so evident in the pictures."

"Yes sir. In order to see to arrest the defendant we did allow the room to air through the open door. Otherwise, we would not have verified it was safe to enter. Even so, we wore masks to protect ourselves."

"Did you test his blood for drugs?"

"Yes sir. He tested positive for three illegal drugs, and an unknown substance."

"What other evidence did you find there?"

"In a box next to a computer, buried under garbage, were pictures. Pictures of children together, and children with adults. Pictures that would shock any person."

"Were these pictures more than parents taking naked newborn pictures, or medically necessary pictures?"

"Oh definitely more than that. There were ones which could be those as well."

"Judge, I propose to show these pictures to the court. Not all of them, as over one thousand were found. Only a select few." He glanced back to the spectators. "I also suggest the children be removed, or cover their eyes."

The judge glanced around the courtroom. "Mr. Gleam, I will leave it up to the parents. The children may line the back wall if they like."

Mr. Gleam placed the first picture on the overhead projector.

Audible gasps and cries sounded in the audience.

The first few were some of the ones Mr. Gleam had shown Mistie. Those of the stuffed animals, and the strangely lit room they had been kept in. Next, a few of the ones chosen were 'innocent' new baby, and first bath, or pool ones. After a few of those, came the ones of children with goofy looks on their faces. These brought cries from the audience as some victim's parents recognized their own children.

The next several pictures were of children of all ages with adults. These were so shocking, that many turned away in disgust. Some could see both children they knew, and even adults they knew in those pictures. There was something strange about those pictures. The adults and children had unnatural smiles on their faces.

"Sir, are all of these pictures ones you found in the apartment at the time of the arrest?"

"Yes, Mr. Gleam, all of these and more."

"How do you account for the odd looks on the children's faces?"

"Neither I, nor my officers, know. We can only say they appeared stoned."

"What would you say about the adults in these pictures?"

"Many of them also appear stoned. Different than anything we normally see with the illegal drugs we recognize."

"Have you determined what they might have been using?"

"No sir."

"Do you think they knowingly took these drugs?"

"Sir, that is difficult to say, not knowing what the drug was, or the circumstances."

"Thank you. That will be all." Mr. Gleam took the pictures off of the projector.

"Mr. Adder, do you have any questions for the arresting officer?"

Mr. Adder stood up slowly and walked to the front. He turned to face the audience. "Officer, do you think my client was aware of what was obviously, from your own words, in his garbage can?"

"Considering his whole apartment was a garbage can, yes, I believe he was aware. He had one particular pair of pictures under his sleeping bag."

"And, where are those pictures now?"

The pictures were loaded onto the projector.

Mistie waited to see people's reactions.

The pictures loaded, and showed side by side. First was of him as a boy with the woman known to be his mother. Second was of him as an adult also with her. Both were inappropriate and unspeakable.

Mistie closed her eyes. Who was taking these pictures? They were disturbing. And made her feel hot and icky, as if she had the flu.

"Sir, can you recognize these people?"

"They are known pictures of this man, both as a child, and one more recent with his mother."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"What about these other pictures with children and adults who are here as their parents?"

"The parents are not on trial today. The reasons will be made apparent later."

"Perhaps they should be made apparent today?"

"They will be. Later by another specialist. One who has more knowledge than do I. She can answer the questions."

"No more questions."

"Mr. Gleam, your next witness." The judge said.

The officer stepped down.

"My next witness is an expert in South American cultural drug use. She was able to piece together exactly what this unknown drug is, and does, to its victims."

This witness approached the witness box and turned to sit down.

Mistie glanced across the courtroom at the remains of the person she had known as a brother. How had she ever thought she had known him?

"What can you tell us about this unknown drug?"

"Your honor, Mr. Gleam, observers, this drug was created over time. It was not the first used for, or by this young man. He too was a victim, being given the first doses and trials by the same people who gave this, and other drugs to the other victims here. While their trials come later, a short understanding of the psychological effects of infant and childhood drug abuse is appropriate here."

"Are you saying he was a victim who chose to treat others as he had been treated?"

"Yes, I am. When he was an infant, the drugs of choice involved were alcohol and sleeping pills. At that time, children's cold medicine, and many other medications, were alcohol based. His alcohol addiction continues today. At what point did he become an active participant? Only he can say." She glanced at her paper.

"He was known for his hyper intelligence. However, he was high school dropout who infrequently attended class, even during his first year. He kept looking for something stronger to make him not feel, not see, what was going on around him."

"Did he create the current drug of choice to abuse these children?"

"I cannot say. The recipe is in his handwriting, whether a copy, or his own creation is his choice to advise the court."

"What is contained in this drug of choice?"

"As you can see by the pictures, they want the children conscious enough to 'appear' to be enjoying what is done to them. However, they want them to have no memory of the events. Therefore, they use a combination of sleeping pills, date rape drugs, and a nervous system stimulant, or depressant, to make the children hyper. Sometimes, for the younger children, muscle relaxers are included as well."

"Are you saying these 'designer' drugs may be modified based on each child's personal chemistry to meet the abuser's wishes?"

"Yes. They modify the drugs as they see fit."

"How do they give these drugs to kids?"

"The drugs are easy to combine and add to drinks or food without changing the flavor. A little sugar and flavor added, and no one notices."

"Does that mean a drug supplier is in on this case?"

"No. It is possible a single person at a supplier company may be. With a look at the list of different drugs they have to order regularly in order to abuse these people. It was easy for them to describe themselves as a care home for discounts. No one would question the individual drugs they ordered, or even the quantity if they claimed to run a small group home for families who have medical disorders."

"What would you say the effect of these drug combinations are?"

"The effects differ depending on their plan. Do they wish to take pictures only? They need the victims able to stand up. In some cases, they need muscle relaxers. In other cases, they don't want muscle relaxers. The point was for this young man to be able to be a pharmacist and design drugs to the needs of his grandparents in order for him to obtain the drugs and alcohol he wished for himself."

"Did he realize what he was doing?"

"That is a question to ask him. At some point, one would think a person would realize something about this was not normal, or right, and try to escape. He has never chosen to escape. Addiction is a strong and evil mistress."

"That will be all." Mr. Gleam turned away.

What a terrible thought, that she had lived under the same roof as this not quite human creature. Mistie covered her eyes. Those drugs. Had she been given them? Could they explain her lost days, weeks, months, and total memory loss?

"Mr. Adder, do you have any questions for my witness?"

Mr. Adder jumped up and bounded across the courtroom. "Would you say this young man, barely an adult, was a slave to his addiction?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you believe he could have escaped at any point, had he chosen to?" Mr. Adder tapped his toes against a chair.

"Once he became a legal adult with the right to find a home of his own, yes sir."

"That was how long before he was arrested?"

"Unsure sir."

Mr. Adder nodded. "If he is guilty, what about these fine parents here, shown in the pictures with their children?"

"The man, Blake Jolin, has been on these drugs since he was conceived. These other people have not. They had no reason to suspect him, or the other people in the cases. To be given the drugs once, or twice, and wake up feeling hot, sick, and wet did make them choose to find an answer. That is why they are in the victim box and not on trial. They realized that not only had their children been doped, but so had they. The shame is apparent on their faces. However, to fault them would be to fault society as well. We cannot protect ourselves from an enemy we do not suspect."

"Is this man your enemy?"

"No. Not my enemy. He is the product of the enemies of Mother Nature herself."

"No more questions your honor."

She stood up and turned to the judge. "Thank you." She walked down the aisle.

Mr. Adder returned to his seat.

Mistie sat still as a stone. This was a difficult case for sure. This former brother, the whose school grades she could never meet, or exceed, had somehow fallen to a low she could not fathom. Only

fear it. This abuse and loss occurred while she lived in the cluttered and trashed home.

The judge shuffled some papers. "It is time to hear the defendant's case. Mr. Adder you may proceed."

Mr. Adder leaped to his feet. "Mr. Blake Jolin, please proceed to the stand to clear your name." He stood in front of the judge's bench.

Blake slumped so low, his head was under the table.

Mr. Adder walked up to him, and lightly tapped his shoulder.

Blake screamed out. His arms flailed about, attacking anything he could reach.

A pair of officers walked over, and each took him by an underarm and half dragged him to the stand. They deposited him in the seat.

His eyes glazed over, and his head drooped in a broken neck appearance.

"Mr. Jolin, can you please repeat the offenses named against you?"

"Go-go juice."

"What?"

The stir in the courtroom was audible now.

"I have to have my go-go juice."

Mr. Gleam glared at the defendant's distress. "What is your 'go-go' juice?"

"Black coffee halved with whiskey followed by a rum and coke."

"And you have that for breakfast?" the judge asked.

"Of course. What else would I have? They have not allowed me to have any. I don't know how long."

"Are you willing to defend yourself against the charges?"

"What charges? I can't think without my go-go juice."

"So, the choice is to have a drunk in the courtroom, or wait until you detox. Officer, how long has he been in jail?" the judge said.

"Two months sir."

"Is that normally enough time to detox for trial?"

"Certainly sir."

"I am sorry. The jury will have to proceed with the information we have as the defendant refuses to defend himself. Mr. Adder, do you have any more to say?"

Mr. Adder sat his papers down and looked hard at the defendant. "I do not believe my client is guilty due to his drug addiction. He is incapable of making rational, or irrational, decisions on his own."

"He cannot be guilty of incest charges, as they are not valid in this state for an adult child's choice with his or her parent."

"He is incapable of using his intelligence to create new drugs, as he is incapable of sitting up without alcohol in his system."

The judge looked around at the courtroom. "The jury will begin final deliberations for this case in the morning."

The day of deliberations dawned bright and clear.

Mistie stopped at the donut shop again on her way to the courthouse. Her thoughts wondered to the previous week's proceedings. Why did Mr. Adder appear to not defend his client? What would the jury decide today? What will that mean to me? Does Blake even recognize me? Is he even able to?

The courtroom filled.

The judge entered and sat down. "Do you, Mr. Adder have anything to add to this case?"

"No sir."

"Do you, Mr. Gleam have anything to add to this case?"

"No sir."

"Jury, do you have any final questions for the defendant or the prosecution?"

No one in the jury spoke up or raised their hands.

"The jury may exit to the deliberation room, while the rest of the courtroom shall remain at a reasonable volume level."

The jury left.

Blake Jolin was asleep with his head on the table.

"He won't live long," was whispered behind her.

Mistie looked up.

Justin was beside her. "Sorry I couldn't be here sooner. I have read everything you sent. The drug combination he is on is extremely addictive. The withdrawal alone will kill him."

Mistie stood up and held out her hand. "Good to see you. The army keeps us too busy. I guess they won't let him taper off?"

"Nope. Pure cold turkey. It's surprising he has lasted this long. Unless he is receiving something under the table."

"You missed the whole trial."

"I'm here for the sentencing. Plus, the next trial will be the hardest on you. Mom wants to be here for you too."

"I don't want her to see it."

Justin took both of her hands and looked into her eyes. "She thinks of you as her daughter. You need her here for you, regardless of what happens."

"You have three sisters already; she doesn't need another daughter."

He laughed. "Don't tell her that. You are different. You need her. My sisters are almost too independent. They barely remember mom exists."

"Really?"

He nodded. "Only you remember to call her and let her know you make it safe when traveling."

Mistie leaned back. Calling was what people did, wasn't it?

The jury returned.

Everyone settled quickly.

"Jury, what have you decided?"

The jury speaker stood up to read the list of charges. "Blake Jolin you have been charged with drug possession, and manufacturing." The list continued into the depths of each type of abuse.

"The jury has found you innocent of the incest charges. As an adult, you have the right to such behavior with a consenting adult, even if the jury considers it morally wrong." The muffled sounds of agreement and dissent could be heard, and quickly hushed.

"The jury has declared Blake Jolin guilty by association on the charges of knowingly contributing to and participating in a child abuse ring. The condition of the evidence, hidden under garbage in a box in a home where at least one other person resides, leaves open the possibility that he did not know or use these products." No sound came from Mr. Adder or Blake Jolin while the agreement and dissent sounds whispered through the courtroom.

The speaker turned to look at the judge before continuing. "The jury has declared Blake Jolin guilty of all drug possession and drug

manufacturing charges. Reviewing all the written evidence, we can see his known handwriting on several recipes. Regardless of whether or not he knew the intended use of his creations, he did create them for himself, and others."

Mistie half expected to see the crowd jumping for joy.

There was no such thing. Most of the observers were glad of course. The victims smiled, and held hands with those nearest them.

Blake was not the ringleader. He was only a victim doing all he knew how to do. Blake Jolin himself seemed unmoved.

His lawyer sat stoically beside him.

"Blake Jolin, the jury has found you guilty on most charges. Do you have anything to say?" The judge asked.

Blake lifted his head. "No. Sleep."

"Blake Jolin, you will remain in the medical ward of the prison until sentencing, after the other three associated trials."

With that, two policemen stepped up to remove the barely conscious Blake Jolin from his seat.

"That will be all for today." The judge exited the courtroom.

Justin grabbed Mistie's hand as she stood up. "I will go back to the hotel with you. Mom and I have the room next door to you."

Mistie tried to smile at him. However, to see the one she had called brother practically dragged down the aisle, and back to prison had not been easy.

They left the courtroom surrounded by people.

Even so, it felt as if someone stared at her. She turned in the direction.

A head ducked behind a door to an office.

She moved closer to Justin and hurried into the crowd.

Chapter 32

Liza in Court - Forever Young - Year 23

Liza walked into the mostly empty courtroom. Her footsteps echoed in the silence.

Blake John's trial had demanded extra chairs. They had been removed.

Mistie, Fritz, Mr. Gleam, and another man were at the front, no one else.

Her footsteps faltered as they turned to stare.

Mr. Gleam held out his hand. "Hi Liza, this is merely a hearing. Mistie's friend Justin is here. We felt four witnesses would be a good number."

"Shouldn't Merlish and Cal be here?"

"No. They will each have their own hearing."

A door closed.

The judge walked in. His eyes appeared tired. He sat on his chair behind the massive desk.

"Mr. Gleam, do you think we can safely be a bit irregular today?"

"How so?"

"This is only a hearing, and there isn't really a plaintiff. Can the five of you sit in the plaintiff and defendant's seats? I don't feel like shouting to be heard to such a small group."

The all sat down and waited on the judge's questions.

The judge looked at his notes a moment.

"Mr. Gleam, can you please explain why we are here today?"

Mr. Gleam glanced at Fritz and stood up.

"Your honor, this is merely a tidbit of the larger case files. I wish we did not have to bring it to your attention."

He walked around the room, organizing thoughts as far as Liza could tell.

She glanced down at her writhing, sweaty hands.

"I do not wish to restate the entire long case here. Suffice it to say, we are here to determine if Liza can in any way be held liable for the damage done to these young women, and if she should be

required, or even allowed, to be a witness in any part of the main trials."

Mr. Gleam turned to the judge.

"What was her role in the case?"

"Liza was the investigator hired part way into the project. She was selected to add a comfort level for the girls, and mothers, to feel safer talking to one of their own gender."

Mr. Gleam glanced at Liza, then back at the judge. "She has worked with these women and girls, tracking them down as they move frequently, trying to be their friend, and attempting to keep paperwork on her project up to date."

"Is there anything else you wish to add?"

"Not at this moment. If you will ask her to tell her story, I am sure your decision will be more clear."

"You may rest."

Mr. Gleam walked back to his seat next to Fritz.

The judge reviewed a few notes, before he glanced up. "Liza, you may give your story."

Liza jumped to her feet, knocking her chair backwards. She blushed and stammered, trying to find words to say.

"Liza, please relax. This is not a criminal trial. Pick up your chair. You may sit if you are more comfortable."

Liza picked up her chair, and pulled it forward, to hear clearer. "Sir, may I ask what charges are being brought against me?"

"None. The only thing you could be accused of at this point is not contacting authorities about these girls as soon as possible."

Liza looked at her lap.

"Chin up. It's not that bad. The only other thing you are guilty of is waking up the courtroom." The judge waited.

Everyone laughed lightly at that remark.

Mistie reached across and patted her shoulder. It wasn't much. Enough to give her courage. After all, what Mistie and the young women would be going through was much worse.

She sat up straight and looked ahead, ready to share her story.

"Your honor, I tried to do my job well. I was to follow these single mothers, and their daughters until they were twenty-one years of age. I didn't meet them until their kindergarten years. They seemed

mostly normal then. A bit shy perhaps. I didn't know much about kids, being an only child myself." Liza stopped for a moment.

"I would track them down. They moved a lot, and didn't leave forwarding addresses. Sometimes from one school to the next was a difficult task."

"What did you do?"

"If it was time to interview, say Tammy for instance, and I couldn't find her, I would contact the client and ask if he knew their address. Sometimes they would move the day before a scheduled meeting."

The judge leaned forward. "Did he always have the addresses?"

"Usually. Sometimes, it would take a day or two."

She looked over at Mr. Gleam again. "There is one thing, though. Ashley, the last time they moved, when she was ten, she gave me her address. She was the only one who ever gave me their address. And asked me to never share it with the client. I heard a few days ago that the client had asked Cal and Merlish if they knew where she was a few times in the last several years. He never asked me."

"Do you know when exactly the client asked them?"

"No sir. I merely heard Cal and Merlish talking. They didn't know I was there picking up papers."

The judge nodded. "When did you first become suspicious for the girls' safety?"

Liza thought a moment. "Soon after Ashley left. Things didn't seem normal with the girls. I couldn't pin point it, and neither could their teachers. I also thought it odd that I was supposed to interview the mothers, and they almost never consented."

"When did you mention this to your employers, Merlish and Cal?"

"Shortly after that year, as I searched for the girls who had moved again. They were both wrapped up in many projects, while I only had the one. They seemed to think everything was okay. Though they didn't really listen to every detail."

"So, the details at this point were vague?" said the judge.

"Yes sir. Too vague to explain. Overly shy, frequent moves, few if any friends."

"At what point did you fear for their safety?"

"Their last few years in high school. The project fell apart. I couldn't explain it. Cal went with me on a few visits the last year. The girls were a mess that year."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Yes sir."

The judge glanced at his notes. "So, it was five years from the time you first met them, and Ashley moved away?"

"Yes sir." The whole story was there. In her written record. All the comments, and lack thereof. The pain in the girls' eyes. The odd behavior. Skipped classes. Failing grades.

Liza waited. Would the judge have believed how they had acted toward Cal?

"Mr. Gleam, why do you think Merlish did not take her seriously?"

Mr. Gleam glanced at Fritz then stood up. "Well, sir, it's complicated. As Liza has said, he was a busy manager with many projects going on. Quiet, shy kids, who seemed lightly out of sorts during interviews did not seem out of place to him. One thirty-minute interview a year really isn't much to go one when determining a child's life. Of course, he didn't spend time around the kids himself."

Mr. Gleam turned and walked from one side of the courtroom to the other. "Sir, Liza's reports were eleven a year. Perhaps if they had all been at once, he might have recognized a pattern. He's working on ten different studies, and she bustles up to say, 'This kid's too shy and scared, I'm concerned' what is he going to say?"

Mr. Gleam looked over to Liza. "I think she tried. Emotional troubles are not enough to call for help on, though maybe someday it will be."

The judge nodded. "Okay, you may sit down."

Mr. Gleam walked back to his seat.

"Fritz, what is your connection?"

Fritz looked up at the judge. "Sir I am a private investigator who has accidentally joined two cases, one this massively criminal one, and another case, which I cannot speak of at the moment. I believe Liza is telling the truth. Through no fault of her own, the schools, or her employers, these children slipped through the cracks. The

constant moves made it easy to slip though. They should have been a red flag. Someday, they will be."

The judge studied his face a moment.

Liza didn't know what to think. Cal and Merlish had left her out of many talks lately. They always had. She had no idea what the other case was which Fritz alluded to.

The judge looked over at Mistie and Justin.

"Mistie Jolin, what do you have to say about this case?"

Mistie waited a moment. "Sir, I think I am the one who set Liza off to find out what was going on that last year of high school. She was always a good interviewer, and I didn't understand why she followed me from year to year."

"Mistie," the judge's voice softened. "Your life wasn't easy, was it?"

"No sir. I escaped. Not sure how, or why, but I did."

"Did you ever give Liza a reason to suspect things were not normal in the home you grew up in?"

Mistie leaned forward, her face full of emotion. "Goodness no. If anyone found out our lives were not normal, there would not have been a next year. I think I looked up to her as a role model, perhaps. The one constant in my life, which even the teachers couldn't be. Not with all the moves."

She leaned back. "However, if you really think about it, we didn't know it wasn't normal, did we? How could I, or any of those girls? We only saw the aspects of life we were allowed to see, and it was tiny pieces. I didn't feel the need to share details of what I thought I everyone else did at home. No one would."

Tears trickled down Mistie's face.

Liza wanted to reach out, but was afraid to.

Justin reached for Mistie's hand.

"I feel so sad for those other girls. We all moved so much, no one had any idea what 'normal' was."

Her sobs prevented her from speaking.

The judge waited until they subsided. "Justin, what is your role here?"

"Merely Mistie's friend sir. Here to comfort here."

The judge nodded. "So it is my place to decide Liza's fate in these cases."

Her sweaty palms slipped off her lap. She met the judge's gaze.

"Liza, other than waking the courtroom up today, I do not think you are guilty of any indiscretion. However, I do think you will be called on to testify in one trial. The last one." The judge ruffled his papers. "That of Colby Haulin."

She nodded and held her hands to her face.

"Liza, do you think your employers are guilty of not seeing the connections?"

"Not really sir. The last time I brought it up, they sent Cal with me on the last few visits. Men always hold things in, so they may have been doing things I didn't know in the background. Checks, maybe."

Mr. Gleam nodded.

Liza tapped the pages on the table in front of her. "Your honor?"

"Yes Liza?"

"I. I really want to help those women. I know I don't have a place for them. I wish I could rescue them, and protect them from harm. You won't say I can't contact them anymore will you?"

The judge looked at her with a kindly gaze. "You say you want them to come live with you?"

"Sure. I can't take them all. To see them eat, to have a place to rest safely, to dream normal, healthy dreams. Surely they can have that?"

Liza watched his face. No thoughts or emotions were visible.

"I will leave that up to them. Perhaps you may wish to talk to Joan and Trudy Argyle before you offer to take any of them into your home. Do wait until the cases are complete before you contact any of them."

There was nothing more to say. Her dream floated above her head, almost in reach.

"That concludes today. Please be prompt each of you for the trials you are to be a part of."

The judge stood up and walked out of the room.

Mistie and Justin attempted to speak to her. She didn't want to talk.

She turned to Mr. Gleam. "May I have Joan's phone number, please?"

Mr. Gleam gathered his pages together and stopped for a second. "Here."

He handed her a sheet and pen. "Write the number of the room you are staying in, and I will ask Joan and Trudy if either wants to contact you. Let's leave it up to them."

Liza wrote her number and name down. Talking with them would be good.

She practically ran out of the courthouse and back to her room to wait for their call. The followers in the pickup truck could be out there watching. They hadn't been seen in a few days. They hadn't been caught either.

Chapter 33

Landscaping A Family Dream

Nearly two weeks passed. Fritz showed up at their home one day, ready to look around.

"I think it's fine," he said.

"Fritz, we need something to do. Please help us help her." Momma said.

"You don't even know if she will want to come here. It could be a year, or more." The looks on their faces must have convinced him. "Okay, I am not making any promises. Her only fears are the night and stuffed animals. She likes most soft colors, animals, quiet. Really there is no need to change anything."

"The house hasn't been painted in over ten years, we were supposed to do it soon after my mother died. We haven't. It will keep us busy while we wait on the trial outcomes. Do you have any news about them?"

"Only that the first major trial, and first small trial are over. Guilty on most counts. Not guilty, thankfully, for the second."

"Not guilty. Are you sure that's good?" Quin asked.

"Yes. We want all three minor cases not guilty. It doesn't matter to your sister, or any of the other people involved. I'll send you more information later. Please don't look for these trials. Not all the media information is accurate."

"If they are connected, they should be guilty, shouldn't they?"

"If the baby seller had a wife, and she did not know what he was doing, would she be guilty? Same principle, although not the same circumstances apply here. The last minor case; may receive a partial guilty plea. We hope not."

"What is he or she guilty of?" Momma sat her drink down.

"Doing the job he was hired to do. Not asking questions. Not realizing the questions that needed to be asked."

Quin turned the decorating pages over. "What about Patricia? Any news there?"

"We don't know anything for sure. We are awaiting DNA tests on a few individuals. It could be a while. Finding Mistie so fast was pure luck."

Momma looks so sad. We may be able to find my sister, her daughter. That may not be enough comfort for her. If I could do anything, I would. She reached out to her mom. "I wish we could find her."

Landscaping seemed the most tedious job. Spring would be here soon, and the ground would soften with gentle rains to bring new life, and new color to their home. So they decided to focus on it first, hoping the trials would go swiftly. Maybe Mistie could join them to paint the house.

The search was on for old clothes to work in.

"All my outgrown clothes are gone." Tricia yelled down the hall.

"I've worn them until they were rags." Helen walked in without knocking. "There's none left."

"How about a trip to a consignment store, to buy already ruined clothes?"

"Sounds like fun." Helen ran to her room. When she came back with her shoes and purse, she sat on the bed and didn't move.

"What's wrong?"

Her little sister's face was red. "When our missing sister comes home, will you forget me? Will we go shopping together anymore?"

Tricia hugged her. "Sure we will. Know why?"

Helen shook her head.

"You have to teach me how to be the little sister. I've always been the big sister."

Helen pulled her shoes on. "We better go. We have too much to do!"

All the landscaping tools were long rusted and gone. Quin had to buy more.

A beautiful home, inside and out, for their missing sister.

As they worked, they knew they had to do it for themselves as well as her.

There was always that nagging doubt that she might not want anything to do with them.

Tricia hoped her sister would want to be in her life as much as she wanted Mistie to be a part of her life.

Tricia studied Helen's plans. They looked so simple on paper. Take out the dead and drying bushes, and add new growth. Should be simple. She looked back at the bushes which had been allowed to grow wild during Gramma's last few years.

The bushes that were four-foot-tall, and evenly trimmed six years ago before Daddy died, nearly reached the roof. She peeked at the bare ground underneath them. Not good. It could take days to dig the two bushes out completely, and there were more of different kinds all around the house.

Quin dragged a ladder from the back yard.

She hurried to help him set it up on one side of the porch.

"Hand me one set of limb trimmers, what were their names again? Anyway, I'll cut what I can. You can make the branches shorter on the ground. I think one is all we can manage today." Quin took a step up the ladder.

The work wasn't easy. As branches fell to the ground, Tricia pulled them out of the way so she could shorten them without being hit by the next branch.

Quin cut the last branch he would need the ladder for, and carefully descended.

Momma walked out on the porch with hot tea and cookies.

Ready for a break, Tricia and Quin gladly went over to sit down.

"I didn't realize how overgrown those bushes were." Momma handed her the tray.

"The ground underneath is dry and bare." Tricia nibbled a cookie.

Quin squinted at the bush. "I wonder how deep the roots go. We may have to replace the roots with new soil so any new plants can take root easier."

Plants and lots of them. She was helping make their home safer, and learning about landscape design in the process. Helping herself, her mom, her brother, and at least one sister put out new roots in a new life, much as the new flowers she would plant soon. New ground, mixed with the old. Life is ever like that. Something always changing, something always the same.

"Tricia, what are you thinking?" Momma glanced at her.

She looked at the untouched cookie in her hand, chocolate chip, her favorite. "Mistie's old life, and ours, are like the bush. Dried up with no hope where they are, or were. So, will her future mix with ours in the new dirt, or merely pass through as the watering trench Helen designed?"

Momma stared, her mouth open. "You are more like your Gramma every day."

Tricia took a bite of cookie, thinking about how sun, water, and earth come together to give us life.

They were soon back at work. The lower branches were even more difficult than the weak, newer branches at the top.

As they cut the bush off at the ground, Quin wiped the sweat off his face. "Most people would leave it like that. Cut off the bush to plant around it."

"I doubt we could dig deep enough holes to plant the little dainty flowers Helen picked out with those roots." Tricia kicked at a few roots sticking up out of the ground.

"I can't do it myself. I will call a friend to help us. Leave it for now. We will cut the other one down tomorrow, then he can be here the next day."

Tricia was so tired and sore already, she carried the tools to help him put them away.

Several days later, the second large overgrown bush was down.

Quin's friend helped dig out the rest of the areas they needed cleaned out according to Helen's diagram. He even brought a tiller and two loads of fresh soil for the new flowers.

The front of the house looked empty, as if it had taken off old clothes, and hadn't chosen what new outfit to wear.

Tricia didn't have time to linger where she wanted to be. Food had to be bought. New sheets, comforters, curtains, pillows, and towels had been requested by Helen to prepare their redesigned home. Soon, it would start to come together as they worked to bring the salvageable pieces of their past with a future they were working toward, as a family. She didn't mind being depended on. Momma and Quin needed her. Helen would never admit it. She needed Tricia too. At least, Tricia thought she did.

By the time she returned home, with her carload of purchases, Quin's friend was gone.

Quin raked the areas that had been tilled. He paused as she pulled in.

"It's looking good. Tomorrow, we can plant. Glad it's springtime. Helen's flowers should do great now with plenty of sunshine." Quin leaned up against the rake.

"Where is Helen? Haven't seen her much lately."

"With her, who knows. She is off on her own projects."

Quin helped her drag her purchases inside and store them in Gramma's room. It didn't feel so empty now. The new pieces took up part of one wall.

Tricia's trowel struck a piece of root. It would take forever to plant the flowers one hole at a time. The directions on the pack clearly stated one hole at a time. She sat back on her heels. The ground might be soft after yesterday's tilling, and a light drizzle during the night, however the multiple flower trays would never be planted without wilting at this rate.

Quin came around the house with the hoe. "We can dig trenches, one for the plants, one behind it for watering. Much better than individual holes."

"That’s a good idea." Tricia stood up. "I'll get another one."

They prepared four trenches.

Quin handed her the flowers to plant.

She made sure the roots were separated enough they could grow well without becoming more entangled than they already were. She tapped the ground around each one gently, and firmly to be sure no animal could easily dig them out.

"You are always thinking about her, aren't you?" Quin held out a yellow dwarf marigold.

"Of course. She hasn't left my mind since we knew she belongs in our family. I wish we could be there for the trials to help her through. I understand Fritz's opinion though." Tricia moved sixteen inches to the next flower's space. Hours of planting left them exhausted.

Chapter 34

Patty Jolin “Mother” Breaks Down

The donut shop was becoming Mistie's breakfast place. Today, she was not alone.

"Mistie can eat all the donuts she wants."

"Now Justin, if she eats too many, she won't have room for lunch."

"You two make me laugh. No one really talks like that," Mistie said.

Justin's mom reached for her hand. "We better hurry. We have to find seats."

They walked out of the donut shop to cross the road.

"You can't sit where I do though."

Justin swerved to avoid a puddle. "Why not? Even though you are a first level victim, we, as your closest friends are still victimized by the things they did to you, because you are important in our lives."

Mistie stopped and stared at him as a car whizzed behind her blowing the horn. "Do you really feel like a victim of a victim?"

Justin's mom grabbed her hand. "Of course not. Now come along before the next car hits you."

Mistie quietly sat down.

The woman she had grown up around was pushed slowly up the aisle.

Mr. Adder paused beside Mistie as he opened the gate to walk into the lawyer's platform.

Could I have become that? Mistie shuddered.

"Are you okay?" Justin asked.

"I feel cold. That could have been me. If I hadn't escaped." She managed to stop the sob rising in her chest.

The shell that she used to call 'mother' was wheeled to the defense table beside her lawyer, Mr. Adder.

Once again, the judge read the list of charges.

Even though it was painful, she listened close, trying to remember any instance of what the charges said occurred. When had these things been done?

"Patty Jolin, how do you plead?"

She lifted her head from an obvious doze. "Not guilty."

"Mr. Gleam will you please enlighten us on these charges."

"Yes sir, Patty Jolin was found and arrested in a smoke-filled home which contained boxes of children with children, and children with adults in inappropriate ways. She has been accused of forcing her two children into these abusive acts, and her son into an incestuous relationship. She was found with drug-encrusted containers in the home, and no sign of food, or a way to prepare food. She was found with over one hundred drug prescription bottles, bearing her name, her son's names, and the names of dozens of other people."

"Mr. Gleam, those are grave charges against a woman who appears so ill."

"Your honor, she is ill. She has been on drugs since she was a child, one of the first abuse victims in this case. She too is a survivor, and I hope to hear why she did not escape and protect her children. While we cannot hold her guilty for what was done to her as a child, at some point, she should have escaped for the safety and life of her children."

The judge turned to Mr. Adder who held one handle of the wheelchair. "Mr. Adder, how do you plead your case?"

"Your honor, my client is just that. She is a victim, as much as everyone in those three victim rows. She was raped and drugged as a child. It is the only life she ever knew. She did not know how to escape, and had no idea there was any other way of life."

"How do you defend her possession of prescription drugs?"

"She was a former nursing home nurse. She didn't see any point in wasting the drugs that her parents could use."

"Does she know stealing from the elderly is illegal?"

"She didn't steal from living patients, only the ones who died. She had no idea sir."

"Are you saying she is uneducated?"

"In the ways of the real world, yes. In the ways of the illusional world she was trapped in from birth, no."

"How does she respond to the accusation against using her own two children in the abuse ring?"

Mistie closed her eyes. Her childhood memories were dim. Which ones would be awakened today?

"Again your honor, she did not know any different. It was the only life she knew."

The judge shook his head. A life of hopelessness. "Mr. Adder, you may be seated. Mr. Gleam you may begin calling witnesses."

Mr. Gleam used this first day to go through each of his previous witnesses. Their documentation against Patty Jolin was almost identical to the documentation against her son. The only difference was that more pictures and magazines were presented to the judge and jury which were found in her personal vehicle.

At the beginning of the second day, Mr. Gleam called Justin's name as a witness to the stand.

"Sir, what is your profession?"

"I am studying to be an army medical doctor."

"What do you feel you can contribute to this case?"

"I can contribute medical facts. I have researched this woman's spotty medical history. She has always been on some form of medication or another."

"Do you believe this has affected her judgment when it comes to knowing right from wrong?"

"Yes sir. Drugs affect all aspects of the brain and nervous system. She is known to have been on drugs since early childhood. These early years were against her will. Problem is, she has a tendency toward addiction compounded by being bi-polar."

"What form does this addiction take?"

"Beyond alcohol and drugs, sex is an addiction. When that is all one has known throughout her life, she will fight to keep the status quo."

"Do you believe she knowingly and purposely put her children in danger?"

"I believe she expected them to live the same life she did. Again, the only life she knew."

"Thank you. Mr. Adder, do you have any questions?"

Mr. Adder walked to the witness stand and leered at Justin. "Are you saying you feel sorry for my client?"

"No sir. Not sorry. Simply stating the facts. She is a victim and has been for forty-five years. There is no hope she can recover and be rehabilitated as a stable member of society."

"You think not?"

"No. The level of drugs she has been exposed to has rotted her liver, ruined her lungs, and led her to risky behaviors leading to multiple broken bones. With, or without help, her current life expectancy is less than one year."

"You are so ready to give up on her?"

"No. Stating the simple facts."

"You state she is a victim, and then wish her death?"

"I wish her release from the memories, pain, and suffering. I have watched her so far during this trial. She is seeing much of the evidence against her as if for the first time."

"Are you saying it's false evidence?"

"No sir. Merely, her drug induced haze kept her from recognizing the truth around her as it occurred. She has no memory of the events she participated in."

"Well, if she was intoxicated from childhood, doesn't that mean she never had an opportunity to be free, and therefore should be innocent?"

Justin looked at his own mother's face. "No. I am sure this woman. This Patty Jolin, had many opportunities to meet people who would have been glad to have helped her save herself, and her children. If she were nineteen, twenty, maybe even twenty-one, that argument might hold some water. However, there were times she lived far from her parents. Her children were in regular schools. The opportunities were there to escape. After forty-five years, she must be held responsible for everything done to her children, though not what was done to her as a child."

"That will be all."

Justin stood up to walk back down to his seat beside Mistie.

His mother stood up also, sobbing, ready to comfort him as he eased back into his seat.

Mistie knew her time was coming. While it invigorated her, she also feared it. Her mother's bi-polar would wake up with her on the stand. Her voice alone would irritate the silent wraith to speech.

"Mistie Nova has been both a victim of this woman, and assisted in preparing for this trial. Please come to the stand for your testimony," Mr. Gleam said.

Mistie rose slowly. She brushed her starched beige outfit. Plain. Simple. Elegant.

Justin's hand brushed hers as she walked past.

His mom reached out gently with her fingers and her eyes.

Mistie lifted her head high as she walked to the stand.

"Mistie, do you know the accused?"

"Yes sir. I do."

"Please tell the court what you know about her."

"As a child, she too suffered. As an adult, she allowed her daughter to suffer from the same fate as she herself suffered at the hands of her abuser."

"Are you her daughter?"

Mistie felt unable to speak. The room seemed to dance with flashing lights. What was the truth? A memory of Tricia. Was she real? Was it true? Was her heart the truth? Or what the law said? No one here would believe her.

"No! She was never my daughter. She never could be, nor will be!"

The shout from the wraith in the chair caused quite a sensation.

Patty Jolin stared at Mistie, and now looked around her. Her next words were whispered. "Please let me out of here."

"Order in the court!"

People who had gasped now attempted to silence their personal fears.

"Mr. Gleam, please remember what the accused has said."

Mr. Gleam hurried back to the desk to make a note. As he returned, he spoke again to Mistie. "Are you the daughter of the accused?"

A ray of hope glimmered in Mistie's mind and voice. "All my childhood I was told I was this woman's daughter."

"How did she treat you?"

"She saw me as a threat. I was beaten, denied food for weeks at a time, spit on, verbally abused, and more."

"Why do you think she did these things?"

"She did these things because she saw me as competition with the only man she was interested in intimately, her own father."

The gasps around the room were audible.

The wraith shrank back down into her chair.

"Mistie Nova, in your professional opinion, do you believe this woman is capable of the charges against her?"

"Yes, under the influence of the drugs, she is. Her bi-polar was made worse by the forced drug abuse as a child. As an adult, she was so addicted, she would do whatever she was told, even abusing her own child, in order to obtain the drugs that she felt made her stable. As she is now, the drugs are what ruined her. However, they keep her alive, little more than a shadow of the person she could have been."

"As her daughter, can you forgive her?"

"She is a product of what was done to her. At the time, it was far more difficult for women to escape and obtain jobs than it is for women today. I realize she never felt able to protect herself. I can forgive her. I cannot condone anything she did."

"Thank you, Mistie. Your honor, that will be all of my questions."

"Mr. Adder you may cross examine the witness."

Mistie took a deep breath. Tension welled in her temples.

Mr. Adder walked carefully from behind the wheelchair, softly touching the hand of his client.

"Mistie Nova, what do you have to hide that you changed your name?"

"I changed my name to Nova to signify a new beginning to my life."

"Is it true that you dropped all contact with my client shortly after you joined the military?"

"Yes sir."

"Why did you wait so long, if this woman so mistreated you?"

"My mind had blocked most of the abuse. Also, as a survivor, it was a few years before I was able to realize that the life I led growing up was not normal."

"If the abuse was so bad, why didn't a teacher see a bruise and report it?"

"Like most physically abusive parents, she hid the bruises with clothing. Verbal and emotional abuse were visible in my nature, withdrawn, quiet, shy, and changing schools every year. However, at the time, emotional and verbal abuse were not documentable proof of abuse, so therefore were not prosecutable."

"You seem intelligent. You even escaped to college where you maintained contact with my client. How did you do this if the abuse was so bad?"

"She saw me as a rival for her father's attention. She found an easy way to get rid of me. She thought the school felt sorry for me."

"Why didn't she choose you to help her in her drug endeavor, if it was true?"

"I had, and still have, no interest in any form of medication. She had found a willing, active, and able participant in her son."

"Are you accusing her of incest with her son?"

"The pictures were visible in his trial, and are available again if you so desire. It was her choice while he was young. It is now his choice to continue the relationship as an adult. Sadly, she saw him as a replacement for her father who was only interested in young girls, not adult women."

"In your professional opinion, do you believe any drug combination would make her able to recover and be a stable member of society?"

"No sir. Her addiction problems are serious. Any form of drug will only feed her addictions and lead her to seek more until she ends up oblivious."

"That will be all my questions your honor."

"Mr. Gleam, You next witness."

Mistie walked down to her seat.

Emma reached out, her eyes full of tears.

Justin waited, ready to be a pillar of strength should she need it.

Mistie brushed against Emma, sat beside Justin, and leaned towards him for only a second.

The judge glanced at Mr. Gleam. "Any more witnesses?"

"No sir, no more witnesses for the plaintiffs."

"Patty Jolin will now testify on her behalf," Mr. Adder said.

Mr. Adder pushed her forward to the witness stand. He carefully helped her from her chair into the witness seat. He continued to flutter about her.

"Mr. Adder, she is settled," the judge said.

Slowly, he walked backwards, watching as if afraid Mr. Gleam would fly into a rage and attack her.

Mistie almost giggled.

"Ms. Jolin, is it true that Mistie Nova grew up in your home as Mistie Jolin?"

"Yes sir."

"You say she was not your daughter. How did she come to be in your home?"

"My parents brought her to me."

"Why have you not spoken of this before?"

"I have no idea. I need my coffee and ciggys."

"Will you please explain to the court why you kept a child who was obviously not yours?"

"I was told to keep her and raise her."

"How did you obtain a birth certificate for her?"

"I don't know. I need my coffee and my ciggys."

"Were you abused as a child?"

"I lived the life of a normal child. Kept quiet and alone as much as possible."

"Did you ever attempt to escape?"

"Of course."

"And what happened?"

"I was sent to a psychiatrist for daring to love someone my own age."

"What does that make you think now?"

"I have no idea. I need my coffee and ciggys."

"That will be all."

"Mr. Adder you may address your client now," the judge said.

"Patty, do you believe you have recovered from your abuse?"

"I am here." She stared at him intently.

"Patty, do you believe you have recovered from you drug addiction?"

"Of course. I need my coffee and ciggys."

"Patty Jolin, did you ever intend to harm any of these people?"

"How could I? I have no idea who they are."

"Do you have anything else to say to the court?"

"No."

"Judge; that is all. I rest my case." Mr. Adder prepared to help her back into her chair.

"Mr. Gleam, do you have anything else to add to this case?"

"No your honor. My clients and I will await your verdict."

The judge looked at his papers a few moments before he turned to the jury. "Any questions from the jury?"

No one in the jury raised their hands. A few squirmed under the judge's intense glare.

"The jury will begin deliberations. Please remain quiet until a decision is final."

The jury slowly filed out of the courtroom.

Mistie watched them go, unsure what she hoped the verdict would be. Her mind swirled from the notification that this woman was not her mother. She looked enough like her, no one had ever questioned it. Oh, she did at one time. Now, the years of drug abuse swirled the older woman's face, causing it to be shrunken in, visible through the wrinkles of other days.

"Justin, I'm going to see if I can talk to her. I have to know."

Emma reached out as if to comfort her, while allowing Mistie to make the decision.

"Not now. I'll be back."

Mistie spoke first with Mr. Gleam who then led her over to speak to Mr. Adder.

"Nothing you learn now can be used in the case. I understand your need to know."

"Thank you Mr. Adder. A moment alone please with the woman I knew as my mother." Both lawyers looked at her, and stepped back a few feet.

Mistie bent down, almost sitting on the floor, and reached for the woman's shriveled hands. "If you're not my mom, who is?"

"No idea."

"No one ever questioned you?"

"People didn't then. They might now."

For a moment, the woman seemed in her right mind. Mistie didn't want to press her too hard. "Get better for your own sake."

Mistie stood up and turned to go. As she moved, the chair struck her.

A look of fury covered the woman's face. Her words were screamed in a whisper. "Find your real family. Leave me to die in peace."

Mistie returned to sit beside Justin. "At least the bi-polar is one less thing to worry about."

Justin grabbed her hand. "Mistie, there is something you need to know."

The door opened and the jury returned.

In all the shuffling, Justin turned away. What is it?

Now was not the time to ask.

"Jury, what is your verdict?"

"Patty Jolin." The speaker read the long list of charges. "You have been found guilty of all charges."

"The jury believes you knowingly abused prescription and illegal drugs as an adult. We cannot hold you responsible for what was done to you without your knowledge as a child. We can hold you responsible for what was found in your home as an adult with an adult child."

Tears streamed down Patty Jolin's face.

"Patty Jolin, there is physical evidence to prove you chose incest with your son while he was a child. You are guilty. As an adult, it was his choice to continue the behavior. You chose to lead a child into a life of crime."

The wraith's hands balled up into her lap.

Mistie knew what was coming.

The speaker did not seem aware of the danger. "You are guilty of abusing children not your own. The incriminating photos were found in your home and in your vehicle."

The bundle of fury leaped out of the chair and skidded as if to strike the speaker.

As she left the chair, two security guards raced to grab her and restrain her in the chair.

The shell fell to the floor in front of the jury box as the security guards grabbed her. Sobbing, she was led back to her chair and strapped in.

"Ms. Jolin, please sit quietly while the speaker finishes!"

The speaker seemed surprisingly unruffled. "Ms. Jolin, due to your bi-polar, and other medical conditions, you are being held guilty on all accounts. However, not fully guilty by reason of insanity." The speaker sat quietly down. Only then was the perspiration visible on his face.

"Ms. Jolin, you will be held in the medical ward of the prison, safe until your sentence is determined at the end of the trials of your parents. Officers, you may remove her." The judge acted calm as he gathered his papers and left a few minutes later.

Mistie stood up with Justin and Emma as they prepared to leave. "I knew she would do something like that."

"We all did. The judge and the jury were warned."

"There was no way to protect her against herself was there?"

Emma hugged her gently. "If there ever was, it was long before you were born. Or even thought of."

Tears tickled her cheeks. "Even so, I feel I should have been able to do something."

"You are the type of person who always sees the good in others, not only the bad. She couldn't change, even if she wanted to. Her illnesses, and the drugs, had so ingrained her behavior. Even your positive example would never have been enough."

"Even if I had been born first?"

"How do we know what strength she was born with? She is a product of her time of secrets, as well as her genes, and upbringing."

Chapter 35

Cal Defends - Forever Young - Year 23

Cal wasn't sure if Liza calling to wish him luck was a good thing, or not. He walked up the steps.

Fritz and Mr. Gleam awaited him.

He caught up with the pair as they entered the courtroom door.

Empty it seemed to him. Too quiet as the door banged shut behind him. Only the rustle of clothes as the three men moved to the front of the room.

A side door opened, and the judge walked in.

"Please, Mr. Gleam and Fritz take the plaintiff seats. Cal, may have the defendant seat."

The judge's outfit rustled as he sat down.

"Okay, we are almost ready to begin today. Cal, the main purpose is to determine how much information you knew, and when you knew it, about this case."

The judge glanced at a few pages.

Cal turned to Fritz and Mr. Gleam.

The judge looked up at him. "Cal, are you normally, quiet and reserved?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you tend to think about things, and verify connections for long periods before you bring them up to your boss?"

"Yes sir. That's my job."

"What exactly is your job? Title and a little information please."

"I am an Information Specialist for our research firm. My basic job was to take all the pages from all the different study projects, combine them into intelligible reports, and report on them to Merlish." Cal twiddled his thumbs.

"Did you work on this specific project?"

"The Forever Young project was almost exclusively Liza's project. With little help from anyone, from the time she came on board. I would see her data, and pass reports to Merlish."

Cal paused a moment. "I was aware of odd comments from Liza for a few years. I thought nothing about shy, quiet kids. In fact, I

thought that might be one variable they were testing for. I never asked Merlish."

The judge made a note. "At what point did it matter to you?"

"When Merlish came to me with the news Liza had gone over my head with her concerns to him."

The judge nodded. "What did you do then?"

"At that time, we had begun inputting all data from all projects into a new computer database. It was our first computer that could hold all the information from all of the projects. He asked me to do a comparison report between her project and the others. He was going to hire people to help input data quickly. No additional help was hired."

"What did you find?"

"Your honor. At first, nothing. I entered all of the data on the old projects to refresh my mind. Then, I started on Liza's."

"And?" The judge said.

"After a few weeks, something seemed odd. I couldn't place it though. I was now two years behind her in data entry."

Cal looked up at the judge. "Sir, I became concerned. I took what I had, and asked Merlish to do something scandalous."

The judge watched him and waited.

"I asked if we could obtain our rival's reports on a child abuse survival study. While waiting, I quickly entered the rest of the reports from Liza into the computer program."

"When did you receive the survival study reports?"

"About two weeks later. They had to verify I had permission to ask, and red tape."

"What did you see?"

"The results were almost identical." Cal stared at his hands.

"Then you?" The judge prompted.

"Yes sir. Merlish compared them, and told me to help Liza with the last few visits that year. I thought it was a good idea after hearing how upset she was with Mistie's visit."

"What did you see?"

Cal shivered. "What I saw was fear, hunger, and things I never want to see again. Two of the four girls tried to climb in my lap!"

The judge looked at him. "How old were they then?"

"They were seventeen your honor. Even seven would be too old to be climbing into a stranger's lap."

Cal held his hands up to his face. This, re-living those two scenes were what he feared most of the whole drama.

"Can you please tell us what you did then?"

Cal let his hands fall to the table. "What could I do? To touch them to remove them would be illegal. I had done nothing to encourage them. Liza made them move. I even attempted to sit out of reach in the second interview of Kelly and Casey, it wasn't enough."

The judge nodded. "This project put you in a difficult place."

"Sir, I don't get along well with people. That is why I took the job. I could work mostly by myself. Other people nearby, but me alone doing my job."

"Do you feel you passed the information on to your boss as soon as reasonable?"

"Yes sir, as soon as I had valid information. Even then, it was all mental and emotional abuse for these girls. Not enough legally to press charges with. Though the two girls jumping in my lap almost accounts for assault charges. That scared me."

Fritz giggled.

"Thank you Cal. I think that is enough. Mr. Gleam, do you have reason to believe Cal did everything as he should have done?"

Mr. Gleam looked at his notes. "Your honor, I think even if he had acknowledged Liza's concerns earlier, he is correct in stating that nothing could have been done. Whether Merlish would have dismissed them, or contacted me, I am not sure."

Mr. Gleam shuffled a few more papers. "I can tell you that based on all of the records I have seen, there is no reason I would have recommended they do other than watch the situation. That is, until the girls jumped into his lap. Those two events occurred close together. Even then, there wasn't enough evidence to go on, and by then, we were all gathering evidence."

The judge looked at his papers again. "Fritz do you have anything to add?"

Fritz glanced across at Cal, then back to the judge. "Your honor, I wish there had been more evidence sooner. However, I believe he

did his best based on the facts he had available. I can find no fault in the actual sequence of events."

He waited before he added in a whisper. "Though I am glad I didn't meet those girls that way."

The judge smiled.

Cal's foot bounced nervously, as he awaited the judge's decision.

At last, the judge looked up from his notes. "Cal, while you may have been able to gather the information a little sooner, I believe there was little you could do with it at first. I hope you are never in a situation like this again. I agree, kids being quiet, or shy, with an interviewer is not usually enough to warrant an investigation."

The judge's pen fell to his notes. "However, I will expect you to be present for the trial of Colby Haulin, as your testimony may be vital. That is all for today." He picked up his notes and pen and left the room.

Cal's foot stopped tapping.

"That wasn't too bad. See you in a few weeks." Mr. Gleam held out his hand.

"Thanks."

"It'll work out." Mr. Gleam gathered his papers and left.

Cal left the courtroom behind Mr. Gleam and Fritz.

Outside, Cal looked around, as if seeing this town for the first time. Across the street was a donut shop. A good place to rest the butterflies in his stomach.

At the table, he glanced around to be sure no one was watching him. I should go back to the hotel to call Merlish and Liza to let them know the good news. It was relaxing to watch kids happily eating donuts, from a distance, anyway.

"Would you like more coffee?" A waitress came by with a full pot.

"Yes. Thank you."

The coffee streamed into his cup. His fears of the day melted away.

Chapter 36

Family Room

A car turned into the driveway. It pulled all the way up. Fritz stepped out. "Hi. I thought I'd stop by for a minute. Is now a good time to talk?"

"Sure, would you like to meet inside, or on the porch?" Tricia raked the dirt off her pants.

"I think the porch will be fine."

"I'll go find Momma and Helen. Be there in a minute." Quin ran toward the house.

Fritz and Momma sat on two porch rockers.

Quin, Helen, and Tricia sat on the boards.

Silence loomed. Birds chirped in the nearby trees.

Helen broke the silence. "What news?"

Fritz glanced toward her, then back at the sky. "So far, so good. The second main trial, and second minor trial are complete."

"How is Mistie holding up?" Tricia asked.

"She is holding up well. The second was extremely difficult for her. The next, though emotional will not be as tough, and the fourth, that will be a sheer nightmare."

"Is there anything we can do?" Quin asked.

"Wait. It will take time. It will take time to heal afterwards as well." Fritz rocked the chair.

"You seem distant today."

"We were a bit concerned at the second minor trial. I think it went okay. There may be problems during the third minor trial. They won't affect Mistie. However, I know he will be required to be a witness at the last major trial."

"What do you think will happen?" Tricia asked.

"Definitely a reprimand. Possibly a fine. Hopefully that's all. There is nothing any of us can do."

"Does Mistie know about us?"

"She heard me say there was a DNA match. That is the only clue she has. Think about how difficult it would be on her to be concentrating on meeting you, as well as trying to be part of these

trials. She will want you to see her at her best, not her worst. It might turn her away if she met with you now."

"Can we come to the trial, the last one?" Helen said.

"No. We need to give her time to recover. We don't know the verdict for it, or her emotional state. Let her meet you in her best mood."

Tricia glanced at him. "She isn't going to be in any trouble, is she? You talk about these minor trials."

Fritz wrung his hands. He looked at them. "Not sure. You see, she has lived under an assumed name her entire life. Of course, she did legally change her name a few years ago. So that may solve that problem. Should only be a reprimand anyway."

He glanced at the door. "How is your painting project going?"

"We will begin soon," Helen said. "Lots to do. Save all the family stories, paint, new carpet, and be ready to see our missing sister."

"You will see her. Soon we hope. I have to be going." He stood up and walked to his car.

The empty rocker rocked by itself.

How long until Mistie would be there to enjoy the pleasant motion?

Tricia stood in the doorway of the family room. It was full of generations of accumulated objects. They thought they had cleaned it out some when they moved in. It wasn't messy, or dirty, only full. Gramma's friends, and their relatives, had all sent a little gift to add to their collections after her death as well. The question loomed, where to begin?

"Looks daunting, doesn't it?" Quin walked up behind her.

"Yep. So, do we sort as we box and take out, or as we put back."

Momma hollered from the kitchen. "As we take out, or it will never be done. It'll end up boxed in the attic."

"We'll all have to work together then. Is Helen here?"

"She will be soon. Go ahead and start with the furniture. Stuff to be sorted that you question set along the wall. I don't think we will donate any furniture."

Tricia and Quin moved the large couch into Gramma's empty room. It would do for temporary storage as they worked. Then, the three large chairs, and small rocking chair were moved.

"You know, if Mistie comes to live with us, she may want her own chair." Tricia said.

"We need to clean all of these really well too. Something for Helen to do while we paint."

They unloaded the first bookshelf. At the top were a few treasured books from childhood. Lower shelves were mostly science and history books, with a few odds and ends scattered about. The bottom shelf was full of scrapbooks. Tricia pulled these off. They would never be removed.

Momma walked in with a cup of coffee. "What no place to sit?"

"I'll bring a rolling chair from the kitchen," Quin said.

Tricia held up the scrap book in her hand. "Momma, there is an empty space, next to you. Gramma left it to always hope."

Momma sat in the chair Quin brought, and took the album. Tears filled her eyes as she flipped the pages. Not many missing pictures. There always seemed to be a shadow waiting, at the edge of the page.

Quin sat the rest of the scrapbooks beside her. "Momma we should make a book that will easily tell our family stories to Mistie when we see her."

"Working on it!" Helen's voiced echoed in the kitchen. "First the family tree, then a quick set of pictures of us all growing up. With plenty of pages to add our family stories in. She should enjoy it."

"Well, come help us sort knickknacks. We have to decide what to keep and what to share." Tricia touched a small cat figure.

Helen walked in the room with a drink and snack. "Yes, we do need to reduce them before we paint. Plus, that will leave room for some of Mistie's things. I had hoped we could make it a group project to get to know each other."

"I hadn't thought of that. Should we wait?"

"There will always be the garage to work on together. Don't want to overwhelm her with work when she comes. We want to be the good family, not the wicked step family." Quin grinned.

Everyone laughed at the thought of Mistie working too hard for her new home.

Sorting through the knickknacks took most of the afternoon. They filled box after box, mostly to be donated. They dusted all of the treasures.

Tricia looked at the stack of boxes. "I wish we could put pictures of all the items on the computer. Then we could save them without keeping them."

"Do you really want to hold onto them and go through them again?" Quin said.

"No way. We might decide to keep some then." Tricia placed a vase on top of the last box.

Quin reached for the box closest to the door. "I'll take these to the donation center now, before we change our minds."

"Or forget which boxes are keepsakes and which are to donate."

Chapter 37

Melanie Haulin “Grandmother”

At least they had been able to rest for a weekend. It had been uneasy. Mistie had not wanted to do anything other than rest in a quiet place.

Justin watched her close. Wasn't the danger over? She wasn't related to this woman. She couldn't be bi-polar too, could she? Or could the environment have done to her what genes could not?

Monday dawned with a new purpose. What new stories would she hear with this trial? New information was coming out at every turn that she could not have anticipated. The woman she had known as her grandmother was a force to be reckoned with. As much of a flurry of uncontrollable emotions as her daughter.

Mistie sat quietly between Justin and his mom as the trial began. She turned to watch as the doored open to let the woman she had known as 'grandma' enter.

There was a long pause, before the clicking sounds began. At last, you could see the tiny bent frame, holding onto the metal walker as she pushed it forward. She peered at the crowd over the metal frame with every shove.

After twenty minutes, she reached her seat and the trial could begin.

"Melanie Haulin you have been charged with multiple crimes."

Mistie listened. What was the baby buying and selling charge? That one made no sense. Unless it was in reference to what she had made the children do in those pictures. Had she taken those pictures?

"How do you plead?"

Mr. Adder stood up. "My client pleads not guilty. As you can see, she is unable to walk unassisted. How could she have the strength, or energy to do any of these things? She only has a seventh-grade education. How could she have any knowledge of drugs, or how to manufacture them?"

The judge looked to Mr. Gleam.

Mr. Gleam stood up, glanced at Melanie Haulin, then at the people he represented. "Sir, I will have to bring out some of the child victims in this case to prove what damage this woman has done to them, intentionally, or not. There is medical proof that this woman may not understand the consequences of her actions as fully as she should. However, she is a danger to society because of that lack of understanding. As for her education status, even though that is common for women, and even men her age, anyone who can read and write can learn. In fact, with the advent of television, all you needed were ears and eyes to learn things you didn't know before."

People in the victim's rows shivered in fear that they would be called.

"Bria Jennell, would you please come forward. Your mother may help you through the gate." Mr. Gleam spoke softly. He held out his hand to the small child as she stepped forward.

Her mother had tears in her eyes as she led her child step to Mr. Gleam.

"I don't want to let her go." The mother mumbled softly as her daughter took the stand.

"Hasn't she suffered enough?" The mother stayed there, afraid to move.

"Dear lady, would you prefer to sit at the prosecution table?" asked the judge.

The woman skipped through and grabbed the closest chair facing her daughter. As close as she dared.

"Mr. Gleam please tell us the age of these children, how long they have known the defendants, and remember that accordingly."

"Yes sir. This child is five. She has known them since she was an infant in their daycare." Mr. Gleam turned to a slight rustle in the audience.

Something flickered in Mistie's memory. Some shadow, she wasn't sure what it was.

Mr. Gleam looked back to the tiny child on the stand. "Bria, would you please tell us what you know of Ms. Haulin and her family."

Bria looked up at him, and glanced to the jury. Swallowing, she looked back at him. She stood up. "She was often in the nursery

with us kids. She liked to touch every child there. She smelled funny and talked funny."

"Where did she like to touch the kids?"

"She would touch our heads and rub her hands down our back to our bottoms and pull us to her. She made us sit in her lap."

"What else can you tell us about her?"

"She would say we didn't love her if we wouldn't sit in her lap."

Gasps were audible in the room.

"Did you know her husband?"

"Yes, he came occasionally. He took pictures of us."

"As a group?"

"No. He preferred individual pictures. We had to go into a dark room so the pictures would turn out okay."

"Was the room dark when you went in?"

"No. We went in, and he made us change into funny outfits, then turned out the lights."

Again, the gasps were audible. There was more rustling.

Mr. Gleam waited so everyone could hear. "Was this woman in the room then too?"

"Yes. She would tell us how to sit or lay for the picture. Sometimes using dolls to show us."

"Did she touch you when taking pictures?"

"She said it would make our legs lay straight."

A muffled scream echoed through the room. A child flew down the aisle and out the door. Everyone waited as a mother, tears in her eyes hurried to catch the fleeing child.

"Did they take pictures at the daycare?"

"Yes, we had to stay late for them. They always did lots of pictures, some in those funny outfits, and some dressed up."

"What did the funny outfits look like?"

"Pieces of cloth, like you blow you nose on. Ribbons, nothing much. It was cold."

Mr. Gleam looked up at the judge. The judge nodded.

"Bria, I am going to put a few pictures on the screen. Tell me if you recognize any of these."

Bria glanced away from the screen. Her lower lip trembled.

The first picture was of her in a fancy spring dress. A tad short for a young girl.

"I remember that one. I was two then. They caught me playing outside in that."

The second, looked like her lying on her side, covered in dirt with a large pig toy on her front side.

Bria stared at it in disbelief. "That can't be me. I hate dirt!" Sobs shook her body.

The third was an overhead shot of her laying on her back on a pillow with a material snake, like a door blocker wrapped around her neck, with the head on her chest. Part of the photo was greyed out.

Mistie covered her face. The glazed look on the face of the child in the photo was too familiar. Much like the glazed look she imagined she had while facing the nightmare faces when she was drunk. No child that young should be drunk enough to not remember anything.

"I don't know that! I don't like snakes, but I do remember seeing that snake. Ms. Haulin's daughter makes them."

"Bria, you don't remember being pictured in those last two pictures?"

"No. Anyone would remember that. Momma, can we go home now?"

"No dear, sweet, child." She turned to face where Mistie was sat for a second. Her face streamed tears. "I wish they could destroy all the evidence before it destroys my child."

Mistie leaned forward and reached almost to her hand. "I understand. I wish they could too."

Mr. Gleam looked back at the child on the stand.

Bria cried and tried to be still as she was told.

"Is there anything else you can tell the court about these people?"

"No, they make me feel hot, and sick to my stomach when I see them. My stomach always hurts after seeing them. We rarely see them."

"Bria, do you mean you rarely see the pictures? Or do you mean your stomach always hurts after they take pictures?"

Bria barely contained herself. "Both!" She screamed before vomiting all over the stand. With that, she escaped and ran to her sobbing mother.

The courtroom was loud for a few moments as someone rushed to clean the witness stand. The mother and daughter held each other and sobbed.

Mr. Gleam walked over to her. "You are doing a great job Bria. We are almost done. Can you stand in front of the witness stand and show us where your stomach hurts afterwards?"

Bria bravely walked back to the stand. She placed her right hand low on her belly, below the belly button. She started to walk back.

"Thank you, Bria. Will you please return to the witness stand for a few minutes more? Mr. Adder will ask you a few gentle questions now."

Bria looked scared. She climbed back up to the seat.

Mr. Adder walked up with an unfriendly look on his face. "Bria, do you believe those pictures are of someone else?"

"I hope so."

"Do they take pictures of other kids there?"

"Sometimes, though not as many as of me."

"Where was your mother when they kept you extra time?"

"She worked. She thought they were okay to baby sit me while she worked."

"Never again will I let her out of my sight!" The mother's sobs interrupted Mr. Adder.

This trial would only make her grief worse.

Mr. Adder turned to Bria again. "Child, would you do anything these people told you to do?"

"Then I would. Now, I would run from them."

Mr. Adder stepped back. "That will be all for now. Bria, you may go to your mother."

Bria and her mother went back through the gate to their seats.

Mr. Gleam was in no hurry to call his next witness. He waited on the sobs to subside. At last he stood. "Mr. Adrian Shultz you may come to the stand."

A lanky looking teen on the back of the victim's row stood up. His face turned red as he tripped over the people around him, trying to reach the gate. He slowly approached the witness stand. When seated, his nose wrinkled. He moved the seat back as far as he could.

"Mr. Shultz, is the smell of vomit still there?"

"A little. I am almost too tall to smell it."

"Mr. Shultz, please tell us what you know about the defendants."

"I have known them off and on most of my life. They wander away for months at a time, and then wander home. They are extremely secretive. Honestly, I'd be scared of being shot if I went to their home uninvited."

Mr. Gleam gave that a few moments to sink in. "Being shot, how?"

"With any gun that would kill."

"Do you know they took pictures of people?"

"Yes." He paused for a bit. "I don't remember any like that though."

"Can you please tell the jury what you mean by that."

"I was usually the one who developed their trip pictures for them the last few years. They would invite me over, to bring my supplies and produce the pictures."

"Do you remember any of the pictures you have seen on this screen?"

"The one of the girl in the dress, yes. The others, no."

"Did you stay while developing pictures?"

"Sometimes. They would give me something nice to drink and we would watch TV. Somehow the hours seemed to pass and I would wake from a nap with my pictures developed and Ms. Haulin watching me."

"How did you feel when you woke up?"

"Warm all over. Almost a too warm feeling. It soon passed though."

Mr. Gleam turned back to the screen. "Mr. Shultz please tell the court your age."

"I am eighteen sir."

"This may sound personal. Have you ever been sexually active?"

"Sir, I am a Christian, and against that until marriage. I have never even had a girlfriend."

"You have a photography hobby. You are eighteen. You developed film for these people. Did you ever find any pictures missing that should have been developed?"

"Sometimes a few prints at the end of a roll would be missing. I never thought anything about it. Perhaps they might be fuzzy ones they threw away before I saw them. Sometimes Mr. Haulin would check the darkroom for me."

Mr. Gleam looked out on the audience.

Bria's mother made a sound.

Mistie tensed. What was coming would not be good.

"Mr. Shultz, this picture was among those found."

The picture flashed on the screen.

A scream sounded loud and clear. Bria's mom screamed, even though she knew about the picture.

Mr. Adrian Shultz did not know. He stared until his face went white. His hands shook, as his mouth fell open.

Justin stood up, ready to run to his aid if needed by the pre-arranged signal.

Mr. Gleam looked back at the courtroom, then at the jury. "As you can see this young adult has no idea that there is a picture of him as an eighteen-year-old man, with a five-year-old girl."

Mr. Shultz dropped his face. "How could it be? I got that haircut for my eighteenth birthday, hoping to become a military photographer."

Mr. Gleam walked up to the stand. "Mr. Shultz, how easy would it be for someone to touch up photos like these and change faces, or other body parts?"

Mr. Shultz looked at the picture on the screen. "If I could see the original. Something like that would be tough to fake, and make all the colors and textures right. No, I don't want to look at it anymore." His sobs filled the silent room.

Mistie watched him closely.

Another life ruined. He had wondered why he his application had been refused by the military. She could have told him. She had begged the military officers not to, and she had kept the secret, for this. Rather than the court martial they could have ordered. There could be no doubt his disgust was genuine. So this poor man would lose his entire future, all his hopes, and dreams, in front of a room full of strangers through no fault of his own.

Justin reached for her hand. He knew what she was thinking.

He had no idea how it felt.

Mr. Gleam stepped away. "Your witness."

Mr. Adder danced forward with a grimace. "You are not denying you were eighteen in this photo?"

Mr. Shultz murmured into the stand. "No. I don't remember it. Photos don't lie." Tears streamed down his face, and his shoulders shook.

"When did you develop pictures for them around your eighteenth birthday?"

Mr. Shultz looked up, and over at the defendant. "I cut my hair on my birthday, and did the initial paperwork for the military that day. That night, I developed photos for them, and returned to do the military physical the next day."

Tears streaked Mistie's face. So close! If only he had waited a few days to develop pictures for them.

"Why did you celebrate your birthday at their home?"

Mr. Shultz was silent for a minute, looking at his hands. "My parents are dead. I had been on my own for a while. I thought they cared for me. I don't remember much that night. I woke up late the next day, feeling hot and damp with sweat."

A flush rose in Mistie's face. Her breathing escalated. Even now, she couldn't control those memories of the same thing. She looked at the shell she had called 'Grandmother.' It sat there smiling, apparently with glee at this man's suffering.

Mr. Shultz looked over to the judge. "What will you do with me?"

Mr. Adder spoke up, almost in his face. "You will be charged with child rape."

Mr. Shultz cried.

The judge reached out. "No, son, I think not. The military did a drug test, did they not?"

Mr. Shultz nodded yes. He could not speak for the sobs.

Justin spoke up. "Yes sir. Mr. Gleam has the results. May I address Mr. Shultz for a moment?"

The judge looked at him, then at Mr. Gleam who was shuffling papers. "You may speak to him while Mr. Gleam finds the results."

"Mr. Shultz, you were denied military duty due to a toxic mix of designer drugs in your system." Justin walked forward to stand beside Mr. Gleam.

"I know the commander at the post you applied for. After this trial, you will take the trial results to the commander, including your innocence, and will be granted a chance to re-apply. You will be tested multiple times in your first year. A lengthy probation. There is fear you may turn to drugs of your own choosing, or to wean yourself from the cocktail that was given to you. Do you understand?"

Mr. Shultz nodded and whispered. "Is there a chance?"

The judge watched him closely. "Yes, you deserve a second chance, really a first chance for you. Mr. Gleam please report your results."

Mr. Gleam looked at the papers in his hand. He compared them with another set on the table. "His blood results show one of the known designer drugs that Blake Jolin was known to create. A combination of a date rape, sleeping pill, and male enhancement drug." He glanced up at the judge. "Would you like to see these, or pass them on to the jury?"

"Both please. Mr. Adder are you finished questioning this witness?"

"Yes. Mr. Shultz, I am finished questioning you."

Mr. Gleam carried the pages to the judge, and helped Mr. Shultz down from the witness stand. "Justin, you may enter the witness stand. It will be one moment."

Justin stepped into the witness box. A few questions by Mr. Gleam and Mr. Adder later, and he stepped down.

Mr. Adder then called Melanie Haulin to the stand for her own defense. He had to help her to the witness stand, turn her around, and take her walker.

Mr. Gleam then began his questions. "Ms. Haulin, did you knowingly buy the baby who grew up to become Mistie Nova, formerly Mistie Jolin?"

"Yes, of course. How else would my daughter have had a child."

A few moments passed before the courtroom quieted, even with the judge pounding his gavel.

Mr. Gleam glanced at Mistie, then at Justin.

Mistie breathed deeply. The room swam around her.

Justin grabbed her hand.

Emma grabbed her other hand.

Mr. Gleam turned back to the defendant. "Ms. Haulin, is the accused, Ms. Patricia Jolin your daughter by birth?"

The figure on the chair shrieked and cackled. "Of course not. I would never have survived the pain of sex or childbirth."

Silence flooded the courtroom for several minutes. A faint murmur began to hum as Mr. Gleam looked at Mr. Adder and raised an eyebrow. Mr. Adder raised his shoulders.

Mr. Gleam looked back to the defendant. "Okay. Where did you find her?"

"The baby doctor, who else? He makes babies for women who don't want to make their own."

"Ms. Haulin, were you involved in the picture taking of these young children?"

She cackled again. "Of course, someone had to arrange them in pretty positions."

Mr. Gleam shook his head again, as if there was nothing more he could say. He started to walk back to his seat, and turned at the last minute.

"Ms. Haulin, were you involved in the twin study negotiated by your husband?"

Her cackle was becoming irritating now. "Yes. We thought it any easy way to test the best way to make girls compliant with our wishes."

Mr. Gleam looked at Mr. Adder. "Sorry sir, that is all."

Mr. Gleam sat down.

Mr. Adder walked slowly toward the witness box. His face was pale. "Ms. Haulin, you plead 'not guilty' yet you have stated you committed the crimes you are accused of. Can you please give the courtroom, your lawyer, the judge, and jury an explanation?"

She glanced at him as if unsure where she was. "Sorry sir, I am old, and won't live long. Better to die with a clean conscious."

"Ms. Haulin, why did you do these things?"

"I couldn't bare the pain of sex, or the thought of childbirth." Her head fell to her chest.

"However, you could condemn small children to it? You could watch, participate, and even take pictures?"

"Anything to avoid the pain. And we needed the money."

Mr. Adder stalked back to his seat. "I can do nothing for you."

The judge waited a few minutes and dismissed the jury to deliberate. As expected, they were only gone a few moments.

The speaker for the jury stood up with the announcement. "Melanie Haulin you have been found guilty of the buying and selling of babies, and knowingly contributing and participating in child abuse through your own admission. The charges of drug possession, manufacturing cannot be determined at this time, as there is not enough evidence either way."

The judge looked at the skeleton on the witness stand. "Ms. Haulin, your crimes are grave indeed. You will be in a special medical prison for women. Thank you for your honesty now."

The judge stood up and walked out of the room.

The crowd exited loudly.

Mr. Adder rushed out without looking at his last client.

Mistie waited on Bria and her mom. "She will be okay, won't she?"

"I hope so."

Bria wouldn't look at her.

"Bria, will you talk?"

The girl covered her face.

"She will always have the memories of what she saw today. At least she won't have the ghosts I feel around me."

"I wish I had known. I would never have let her be near them. Do you really think the ghosts will be gone?" Bria's mom asked.

"I hope so." Mistie said. I really hope so. Those ghosts, those shapes right out of view. They were everywhere. She had forgotten them after she went to college. Now, they were back, in full force. Following her, jumping with each piece of trial evidence.

Chapter 38

Merlish Faces his Fears - Forever Young - Year 23

Even though he had been in the courtroom for the other three trials, he didn't feel comfortable walking into the courtroom alone today for his own questioning.

Merlish looked up the stairs which now appeared to stretch to the sky.

Fritz, Cal, and Liza walked up.

Liza stepped forward. "We were at the donut shop watching for you. We'll go in with you."

Merlish smiled at them and glanced back at the stairs. They had resumed their normal height. Slowly they walked up and into the building.

The judge was ready and waiting for them.

Merlish drew in a deep breath. Not a good sign. The pit of his stomach fluttered.

The judge looked up from his paperwork. "Come on in. Sorting some other tiny cases today. Two already down, three to go."

"Hopefully, you include mine in the small ones."

The judge laughed. "Sure. Although yours is more complex than the others today."

Merlish stood on the plaintiff side while Cal, Liza, and Fritz seated themselves in the first row.

The door slammed and Mr. Gleam walked quickly down the aisle. "What an odd outcome yesterday." He settled beside Merlish, and nodded to the judge to begin.

"Merlish, please explain how the process of finding your clients begins. Wait." The judge held up his hand. "First, testimony today may be used in the last trial. Do you understand?"

Merlish nodded.

"Go ahead. We need to know how clients are normally found for your studies. How this one differed. How the process works, both normally, and in this case."

Merlish closed his eyes. He had been prepared for this. Really he had. All of his knowledge seemed to have flooded away.

"Adam Jolin," whispered Mr. Gleam.

The cloud swirled in his mind and began to take shape, slowly. "We were a small company then. Recently opened, really. No practice, no examples to follow. Working in two different, complimentary directions. My partner, who had no part in choosing this study, is long dead. He worked with the in-vitro fertilization. Eventually, a few years after the client ordered this study, he had enough resources to break off from our joint venture."

Merlish almost wished his partner had questioned this study, but he never did.

"Did you always work together?"

"Almost never, really. I usually asked him for help finding suitable twins for studies from his work. Our projects were merely complimentary, not necessarily together."

"Was there any strife, or any reason you broke apart?"

"Not that I know of. It had always been in the plan, once we had enough resources, and working projects, and so on, to go our separate ways."

The judge took a few notes. "Okay, did you continue to ask for samples from his work for your projects?"

"Sure. For several more years, almost until his death. About that time, we were both wrapping our companies up, and not planning any more long-term studies ourselves. Short term ones, sure. No more long term ones."

The judge took a few more notes. "Tell us about this Colby Haulin."

Merlish glanced at Mr. Gleam. "Your honor, if he had come to us with that name I would have been more suspicious of his intentions. His documentation at the time gave us the name 'Adam Jolin.' He never mentioned a wife, and the young woman he brought to donate eggs was at first assumed to be his wife, as they had the same last name."

"When did you find out differently?"

"After she became pregnant with his child. Well, no. We were told the child was his and hers after it was born. She had not been seen by my partner since donating her eggs."

The judge made a few more notes. "Did the women seem normal at this time?"

"Yes sir. We saw no problems."

"Merlish, did you not question the relationship between the man and the woman who donated her eggs?"

Merlish hesitated. "Not really, not until after she brought her baby to be added to the study. Even then, we felt uncomfortable asking. Maybe she was really his wife, only half his age."

The judge looked at him closely. "Was there another reason?"

Merlish squirmed a bit. "We were a new company. Learning the rules and laws, which were changing fast at that time. Without this study, we would have lost the massive grant we had just received. We would have been out of business, with many studies left hanging."

"Your honor, if I may?" Mr. Gleam interrupted.

The judged nodded to him.

"Your honor, in my opinion, by the time Merlish and company realized this woman had a baby it was too late. The other babies were being born already, and their lives would not have changed for the better. In fact, without Liza's visits to add normalcy to their lives, they might have been worse off."

"Accepted. Not proven. Accepted. Merlish, you may continue. What results did they ask for?"

Merlish glanced at the page in his hands. "Mostly mundane stuff, height, age, weight, hair color, relationship with mother, relationship with peers, relationship with teachers, and the siblings together had a few extra questions. Nothing to raise any suspicions."

"At what point did you begin to raise suspicions?"

"Honestly, your honor, I never did. About the time the babies were born, I was adding staff. Cal took over this study for a while, and went on to be the data specialist over all of the workers on all of the studies. He sent his reports of the studies to me, and I planned new studies and tied up old ones."

The judge waited a moment. "When did Liza come into the picture?"

"We hired her the year before the girls started school, so they could communicate with someone of their own gender. We felt it

was wise. We hoped she could help on other cases, though quickly it became apparent she had all she could do to keep up with the girls, and their mothers."

"Did it never strike you as odd that all of the babies were girls?"

"No sir. That was part of the study. We had to study the effects of various environments on girls only. Another study was supposed to be started with boys. We never received funding, or paperwork to start it."

The judge read a note. "So, until Liza came to you when the girls were seventeen, or eighteen, you didn't recognize the problems?"

"No. As almost all the visits were weeks apart, it didn't seem odd to Cal, or myself, if they girls were shy and quiet around someone they only saw once a year. I thought they recognized that the woman followed them, and feared her."

"Didn't their constant moves disturb you?"

"No sir. One of the aspects of the study was to determine how constant moving affect behavior and growth."

"So, as soon as you realized something was wrong, you started trying to figure out what it was, and what you could do about it?"

"Yes sir. I wish it had been sooner." Before the study had begun would have been safer. Even if he had lost the company.

The judge shuffled his papers.

The courtroom remained silent.

"Merlish, this is a hearing, not a trial. If 'Adam Jolin' came to you today, would the study have been investigated more thoroughly before it began?"

"Yes sir. DNA evidence would be gathered, even though it is only in its infancy."

"I do not feel you need to go on trial. However, you will be expected to attend, and be a witness in the trial of Colby Haulin. I cannot demand that you do this next part, though I hope you do. I request and recommend that you spend a minimum of twenty hours' community service in an abuse shelter help center, or similar type work. Do you understand?"

Merlish nodded, afraid to speak.

The judge looked across at Cal and Liza. "I recommend ten hours for both of you. I cannot require it of any of you, and hopefully

this will never happen again. While there, share your story. You may rescue more people. You may find more victims of this pair of people. Please though, wait until the trials, and sentencing are over."

The judge tapped the pages on his table and walked out of the room.

Merlish took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. It was over. Now he could breathe again. Until he was on the witness stand. "Thank you."

Outside the courtroom, Voices babbled around him. None of it made sense as he relived those moments of fear for his own freedom in the courtroom. He had never intentionally broken a law. However, people in his position had been sent to prison. That would be more frightening than he cared to think about.

Chapter 39

Heart of the Home

Next day, the painting fun began. Quin painted the top part of the wall, and Tricia the lower part. Momma cleaned the trim pieces.

Helen sat in the middle of the room and wrote down family stories as people remembered them.

The doorbell rang when they were almost done.

Quin was on the door over the ladder. "Guess I better get down."

Tricia was splattered in paint.

Fritz waited on them.

"Is now not a good time?" He looked at the speckled family.

Helen reached out her hand. "You can come in, or we can all go to the porch."

"The porch again," he suggested.

They walked outside and sat down.

Helen returned with drinks for everyone.

"Everything looks good here."

"What news do you have for us?" Helen sipped her drink.

"Court battles are ongoing. This last one gave us a surprise though."

"How so?" Helen asked.

"The accused decided to admit to most of the crimes she was accused of. Shocking really. Her attorney had no idea what to say or do."

"What will happen to her?"

"Most likely, prison for life, which won't be long."

"How did the other smaller trial go?" Eleanor said.

"It went well. I think the judge believes Cal could have gone to his boss sooner. However, he waited to gather all the information that he could, so his boss would be more likely to believe the evidence."

"How much longer do you think?" Tricia asked.

Fritz glanced at her before he looked out at the tree full of birds. "It's tough to say. So far, the defense isn't putting up much of a fight. I really thought they would on this last trial." He sipped his tea.

"I don't know if he believes they are all guilty, and letting them hang themselves, or what."

"More likely, he thinks they aren't and plans to extend the abuse by forcing them through the appeals process multiple times. The longer he can extend the trials, the more their lives, and ours, are put on hold."

Tricia shivered at the thought. It could go on for more years. They didn't want to put their own lives on hold for years longer to meet Mistie. "Fritz, can we please meet Mistie after the trials, even if it goes to appeals? Appeals won't be soon will they?"

"No Tricia, they want be soon. It depends on the court dockets, and how long both lawyers want to review the evidence, and how much more evidence they might already have that hasn't been admitted."

"We feel we should be there for Mistie." Quin hugged Tricia.

Fritz sat his cup down on the wicker table. "I promise I will talk to her if it looks like any of the trials will go to appeals. With four separate trials, if they all go into appeals at different times, it could be a disaster."

"Do you think she remembers us?"

Fritz turned to her. "She knows something. The woman who is not her mother told her she is not her daughter." He sat his cup down and left.

The weight of what had been discussed left Tricia alone. Right now, her whole family looked forward to inviting Mistie into their lives. However, if it would be many years, would they give up on Mistie? Would she give up on Mistie? She couldn't wait forever. She had to eventually start her own future. She couldn't ask her mom, brother, or even Helen to wait forever either.

Tricia sighed and stood up. She knew she had until the end of summer anyway. Hopefully by then, she would know something.

Momma and Quin went to finish painting.

Tricia carried the cups to the kitchen and went to take a shower. She wanted to feel clean and pretty when she went to do the weekly grocery shopping. What extras should she buy in case Mistie asked about them, and came to visit before the trials were over?

Tricia and Quin placed the last chair in the redecorated living room. Though the amount of furniture hadn't changed, the order

had changed. The room felt larger, and brighter. New curtains would go up soon. Thin to let light in, with a dark shade which could be pulled down for privacy.

They walked to the kitchen.

Momma had baked cookies and made hot tea.

Sitting at the table here made Tricia feel safe. It was home to her. Would all the redecorating make her as out of place as Mistie would feel when she came to see them the first time?

"I almost don't want to change the kitchen."

"The new paint is only a few shades lighter. It may be the original color of the kitchen." Momma sipped her tea.

Tricia munched the cookie. "What other changes did you have in mind?"

She looked around the room slowly and carefully. "Not many. More of a deep spring-cleaning. Much like the family room, when we go through all the cabinets we will donate what we don't use." Momma glanced at her daughter and son.

"Unless, of course; you want some of the extra things to start collecting for when you move off on your own."

"Haven't thought about it. Between taking care of Gramma, and now the search for Mistie and your sister, I haven't had time to think, or plan, for the future." Tricia sat her cookie on the plate. A future where she moved away from home. Not a pleasant thought. Momma, Quin, and Helen were all the people she knew well. Even the friends from the homeschool groups had drifted off on their own now, and no longer contacted her. It had been at least a year since any had called and invited her to a movie, or walk in the park.

Momma cupped her hand around her teacup. "Well, let's plan the kitchen. I think we need new potholders and new dishcloths. Nothing fancy. Something light, pretty, and clean."

"Do you think the stains make it look like we cook often, or are lousy cooks?"

Momma laughed. "No. I need the change. Plus, Mistie may feel she herself is stained. A fresh clean start may be exactly what she needs."

"Of course," Quin said. "We can keep the old if they make her feel better about our cooking."

"Especially your pizza." Quin's pizza. A deep dish with at least two inches of toppings. No two bites were ever the same.

Tricia didn't pay attention as the talk shifted to other matters. Mistie had been on her own a while now. Though they didn't know the particulars, they did know that. This place was busy, active, and happy. What a change for Mistie. She would need a quiet place to relax, and recover.

Paying no attention to the conversation around her, Tricia interrupted. "We have to have a quiet place where she can rest from all our noise. We are used to the noise and commotion. She may not be used to it."

Helen had walked in the room and was showing something to Momma. "Here Tricia, look at this. How about a tiny arbor here? Lots of trees and shade."

"That would be perfect. Now we have to raise the money for it."

"I think I will ask other people to pay me to research family trees. After we finish the remodeling. I really enjoyed creating our family tree."

Quin took the drawing from Helen. "I can work in a pizza place. Delivery jobs bring in some money."

Tricia thought about what she could do. Nothing came to mind. There had been no dreams for the future. Somehow, she had always been happy in the present. "I will have to look and see what I can find in the paper," she said.

"I'll stay home, to clean, and cook." Momma said.

Helen grabbed her hand. "Momma, you have always done that. Don't you want to do something different for a while, and leave Tricia to mind the house?"

Momma laughed. "What would I do? All I know is cooking, cleaning, and caring for others."

"You enjoy redecorating. Help others redecorate. You can teach Tricia too, and build your own business for you both. It will keep you busy while we wait."

Tricia guessed what her mother was thinking. "Momma, that sounds like a good idea. We all have a lot to learn, and it could be fun. Quin may want to become a carpenter on some of these projects, and help us build dreams for others."

Chapter 40

Colby Haulin, Creator of Forever Young

Mistie shuddered as she dressed for the day. She remembered little of her time with this man she had known as a 'grandfather.' She wondered what he knew about her that she had no idea about herself. She settled on a plain grey outfit without color to offset the drabness.

A knock sounded at the hotel room door. Outside the peephole, were Emma, Joan, and Joan's mom, Trudy.

She opened the door, and walked out. As ready to face this trial as was possible under the circumstances.

"This trial may last weeks. We will all be here for you." Emma said. "Justin will be joining us in a few minutes."

"Thank you." Mistie looked over at Joan's mom. "Do you plan to help the other victims become less of a victim?"

Trudy walked along beside her. "Sure. If I can, and they want help. I have my family to think of too."

"Mom. Our family is busy. We can all take care of ourselves. You've always wanted to really help others. We can always call you if we need you."

"Glad you think everyone can deal with it. Of course, maybe some of them will want to move nearer to us."

Justin joined them as they all walked up together into the imposing building. Perched on the high column of steps.

Muffled sobs sounded behind her usual seat.

Women and girls of all ages cried. Some white as paper, others red as a strawberry. Some held their heads down, and hands clasped. While others clenched fists at chin level.

Both doors slammed.

The judge walked to the front of the room.

Colby Haulin was led forward in handcuffs.

Mistie had imagined him in chains, so tight he could barely walk. She almost smiled at the image.

He stopped to stare at the crowd of onlookers before he sat down.

The officers escorting him stepped away. They were obliged to stay close in case anyone in the courtroom decided not to wait on the court's verdict and sentence.

The judge sat his files down solidly on the table. He looked out across the courtroom, as if to look at each individual personally. Small smiles, frowns, and wrinkles formed and vanished.

At last, he nodded to Mr. Adder to begin the case.

Mr. Adder stood up and faced the courtroom. "Your honor, gentleman, ladies, and children. My client has been accused of child abuse, child theft, and other related crimes. He has also been accused of supporting the creation of a toxic mix of drugs to promote the original charges. He pleads not guilty, sir."

Mr. Adder did not look at anyone as he sat down.

Mr. Gleam stood up. He turned to face the jury, then the spectators. "This trial will be painful. If anyone feels they need to leave, we will understand. If you are a witness, you may stay in the hallway, or a room can be set aside for you until you are called to testify. Does anyone wish to leave?"

The only sounds were the rustling of clothes and a baby babbling.

Mr. Gleam waited a few more moments before he called on Ginny.

Ginny stood up slowly, her face red, and walked forward. She eased herself into the chair, and drew her knees up to her chin.

"Ginny can you please tell us what you know about this man, Mr. Colby Haulin?"

She shook her head.

The judge spoke quietly. "Please, respond. Would you prefer to write your answers?"

Ginny nodded.

The judge looked towards Mr. Gleam.

He looked for blank paper and a pen. "Mr. Gleam, you may read her responses, and you in turn Mr. Adder."

Mr. Gleam handed her the blank paper and pen. "Ginny please tell us about Mr. Haulin."

She took the pen, and tried to write something. After a few minutes, she handed it to Mr. Gleam.

"He sees us in the dark. Not fun to be around." Mr. Gleam placed the paper on the overhead projector.

The words hung on the wall.

This was an understatement. It might be all Ginny could remember. What would Mistie say when it was her turn?

Ginny shivered.

Mr. Gleam handed the page to the judge.

The judge passed it back.

"Has he ever hurt you?" Mr. Gleam placed the paper in front of the young woman again.

"Don't know. Don't like him." Ginny closed her eyes.

Her words appeared on the wall. A reminder of the fears of everyone in the front three rows.

"Mr. Adder you may speak to Ginny."

Mr. Adder strutted around and bellowed at Ginny.

She shrank back, and refused to write anymore words. She left the stand.

Mr. Gleam called on Casey.

Casey walked to the stand. She stared at the defendant.

Mr. Gleam walked up to her. "Casey, can you please tell us about this man?"

Casey looked at Mr. Gleam from head to toe. "You are no monkey person like him. I doubt you could dance half as well as he can. I hate to dance though, don't you?"

The courtroom howled with laughter. Stifled laughs could be heard for moments. Even the judge hid his face behind his hand.

The next part of her story shocked Mistie.

And the courtroom. Small cries rang out.

Mr. Gleam waited a moment. "Can you please describe the dances to us?"

"I can describe them. I don't want to do them here, in front of so many people."

"Okay. That's fine." He closed his eyes and looked back at the witness row.

Casey, leaned her head back. "Well, first you have to take off all your clothes. Though sometimes that can be part of the dance too."

He turned back to her. Sounds could be heard behind Mr. Gleam. He didn't turn to look. "Just you, or him too?"

"Oh, everyone. When we would dance, he and his wife would be naked with me and my sister. He said it was more fun that way."

Mr. Gleam closed his eyes a second. "Then what?"

"He danced with his wife, then me, then usually my sister the longest. He liked to pick her up and hold her more than anything. Sometimes."

Cries distracted her.

Mr. Gleam stepped forward to catch her attention again. "Sometimes what?"

"Sometimes he like to dance with us on the floor. Mostly with Sissy though."

The room erupted with voices and screams.

Casey, leaned back. "Emmy liked to dance."

Mr. Gleam waited on the judge to make the room quiet.

"Why did you call them monkey people?"

Casey laughed. "Because they dance like monkeys."

"Did they always prefer your sister?"

"No. They liked me best until I got fat and had to have an operation. They said I would never have a child like my sister did. I want a baby too. When you have a baby, you don't to dance for a while."

The courtroom sounds distracted her.

Mistie gulped. This wasn't one of her memories. What had they been testing for with this pair of twins?

"Would you allow the defendant around your baby?" Mr. Gleam asked.

She looked him in the face. "I would have to do what my momma said, now wouldn't I? Sissy's baby is almost two. She played in the dance they last time they visited Momma."

"What did the baby do?"

"She sat and giggled. I watched from the corner. They ignored me."

The judge let the courtroom go wild for a moment.

"Mr. Adder." Mr. Gleam stepped aside. As the other attorney walked by he whispered, "Please be gentle."

Mr. Adder's face was pale. Paler than any of the victim's faces. "Casey, you say this man is a monkey dancer. Does he seem dangerous to you?"

"He is odd. You never hear or see the monkey dance on TV."

Mr. Adder continued questioning her. His questions led in circles.

Casey's answers made little sense. She exited the witness stand.

Mistie sighed. Casey's story would haunt her. The next pair of twins were Tammy and Ginny, identical sisters. At least genetically at birth.

Mr. Gleam stepped forward and called Tammy to the stand.

Tammy stepped forward with her two-year-old daughter.

Mr. Gleam attempted to stop her. "The infant doesn't need to come, only you."

Her red face looked up into his face. "It's almost her feeding time. She has to be fed on time the worker says, or she will send me to jail. One minute late, and she will fine me."

Mr. Gleam glanced at the judge.

"A short break might be a good idea. Go and feed the infant now. A bite of food for yourself as well young lady."

"Oh none today for me. I ate yesterday." She sat on the floor and took her shirt off to feed the child from her breast.

When she was finished, she raised the child to her hip and went to sit in the witness stand.

The judge waited until everyone had settled down again to give Mr. Gleam the go-ahead nod.

"Tammy, what can you tell us about Colby Haulin?"

"Well, sir, he likes young girls. He's not as interested in me. At least other than my breasts since I had the baby. He once liked Ginny. Not as much as me."

A ripple of sound crossed the courtroom.

"Tammy, do you know where babies come from?"

"Yes sir. Storks come by in the night and drop seeds into the earth. You pick a flower from the plant that grows, and eat it. That's where babies come from."

People gasped, snorted, and chuckled.

Mr. Gleam looked at the poor young woman on the stand. "How then is the father of the child determined?"

"He can never be known. How could it? Children only have mothers."

Mr. Gleam asked a few more questions.

Mr. Adder asked more, and neither could make any sense of Tammy's responses.

Tammy exited the stand.

Kelly stood up for her turn. Defiant as ever, red in the face, and with her fists at her shoulders, she marched to the stand.

Mr. Gleam was about to speak when Kelly burst out. "Why did you take momma's friends away! She says she will die without them. Send them back so she can get what she wants and sleep better."

"What does she want?" Mr. Gleam flipped his papers.

"A good night's sleep. She can't rest with them locked up. She says we are too noisy for her to rest."

"Are you saying you like this man?" He waved towards the defense table.

"Of course not. I always do what I am told though."

"Did you have a baby?"

"Yes sir. The state took it away. They said I didn't have a job, and couldn't support it."

"What happened then?"

"It made Momma and her friends mad. They said they would hide me when I have another baby."

"They want you to have another baby?"

"Of course. Since my sister can't. I have to have lots of babies for both of us."

The room went silent.

"Mr. Adder, your witness." Mr. Gleam walked back to his seat, his hand covering his eyes.

Mr. Adder walked forward slowly. "Kelly, are you saying this man said you had to have lots of babies?"

"Yes sir. He said he would get me at least one baby a year. He wanted me to have twins. He sent me to some doctor who said I was too young to be seen."

"Why did he want you to have babies?"

"He likes kids. As long as they are quiet and behave. I do what I am told." Her face was beet red.

Mr. Adder looked at her face. "Kelly, did you want a baby? Do you want more babies?"

She cowered. "No sir. Being pregnant hurts. Giving birth is scary. I saw swirling images of his leering face during birth. That scared me."

"Do you remember the monkey dances your sister speaks of?"

Kelly looked up. "Of course, the exercise is so much fun. Though, I don't like it when he picks me up. Sometimes it hurts."

"How does it hurt?"

"Sometimes a sharp pain that fades to a dull ache for days."

"Can you show the court where?"

Kelly stood up, and then sat back down. "It hurts where the baby came out. That's odd, isn't it?"

Not a sound could be heard.

Mr. Adder announced he was finished with questioning.

The judge declared the trial over for the day. "You will all be back and ready for tomorrow."

As the courtroom settled the next day, Mistie glanced across at Joan's mom. She knew today was going to be a tough day for them both.

The court was called to order.

Mr. Gleam called Joan's mom to the stand. "Ms. Trudy Argyle, what is your profession?"

She surveyed the room. "I am a specialist in helping people with low self-esteem and self-respect build new lives."

"Don’t you mean re-build?"

"No sir. The majority of cases who come to me have never learned self-respect or self-esteem to begin with."

He glanced back at the victim's rows. "What do you see in the people in those first three rows?"

"I see two different kinds of people."

"How so?"

"I did not witness the first three trials, so I have only heard the testimony of the twin project girls. Outside of the four we have heard; I have known Mistie personally a few years. They are as different as night and day."

"Can you please explain for the court."

"Your honor, the twin study girls have never attempted to learn to respect themselves. They have serious mental blocks."

She looked at the four girls she had heard yesterday. "Those girls. They are at least as intelligent as Mistie. However, she escaped, and they did not. I am not sure why, or how. Someone, somewhere, must have once given Mistie some hope, help, or a smile at the right moment."

"Ms. Argyle, can you please explain why these girls do not understand where babies come from?"

Trudy Argyle did not look at anyone as she spoke. "Your honor, those girls had been involved in sexual activities since early childhood, possibly infancy. To them, sex was as much a part of life as breathing."

She did not heed the gasps from the spectators.

"When they finally reached sex education in high school, the teachers started talking about sex, and they would think something along the lines of, 'Oh those naked games, nothing to know here.' Their minds would wonder, and they would never hear the words that told them this is where babies come from."

"Is that the only reason?"

"No sir. They had been taught from infancy to expect and enjoy the games. So they thought nothing of them. Unlike the other victims here."

"Can you please explain that?"

"The other victims are their examples of bringing children in from the outside. Trying to change those who already know something about right and wrong, good touch and bad touch, and trying to teach them differently. The only way they could, was with the use of heavy drugs."

"As you can see, the children in the twin study did not require drugs. However, their minds are in some ways stuck in infancy. The children they pulled in at later ages required drugs to keep them quiet and compliant. They still have life sparks about them, though somewhat diminished from healthy children."

"How do you explain Mistie escaping and the use of the drugs on their daughter, and grandson?" The judge leaned toward her.

"Your honor, in my opinion, they used the drugs on their daughter to create the zombie like experience they craved early on. When they wanted a more alive performance, they chose to start the twin study. The grandson had to experience the drugged state

in order for them to bring more compliant children into their tangled project."

She glanced at Mistie. "The only way I think Mistie escaped was hope. Though, there is reason to believe that they wanted her to escape to bring more victims to them. After all, Mistie was grown up, and so were the other girls in the twin study. Someone had to go out and bring more small kids in to be victimized. I doubt they thought she could make it on their own, much as the woman they claimed as her mother could not survive without their drugs."

"So, in your opinion, Mistie was supposed to bring more children to them?"

"Yes sir. And by the other girls having babies for them to abuse, and the people those girls and children would come into contact with who had children, the cycle would continue."

Mr. Gleam turned to Mr. Adder. "Sir you may begin."

Mr. Adder walked up to her. "So, you think they expected the cycle to continue?"

"Of course."

"Why do you think the mothers in the twin study did not stop Colby Haulin?"

She glanced at the victim's row. "Look at their faces. Even now, they are drugged. Again, you have to look at their background. These women were carefully chosen groomed for abuse. All childhood playmates of their daughter. All had been abused by him for many years, too afraid to tell their families. Most likely the abuse began long before they knew that those touches were not okay."

"Ms. Argyle how can that be?"

Trudy Argyle glanced at Mistie. "Sir, infants are touched all over by adults, in ways that would be considered sexual abuse by the time the child is five years old."

Noise could be heard again, as people argued the point.

The judge tapped his gavel, and it subsided.

"Please explain yourself."

"Lifelong abuse begins in the nursery." Trudy closed her eyes. She went on to thoroughly explain the process in clinical terms, more in-depth than Mistie had ever heard spoken aloud. "Adults take infant's clothes off. Infants, and small children can't do it themselves. They wipe their bottoms and bathe them. Those very

actions by adults are reported as sex abuse if they occur after a child is able to do those things for themselves. That is where grooming begins."

Trudy closed her eyes. "If sex abuse begins during this stage, or soon after, and before the child is taught that no one should be doing those things to their bodies, the stage is set. They will never see sex as other than a normal part of daily life, since it has been part of their lives from infancy, until it finally stops."

"And what happens then?"

"They become moody, and difficult to be around. Much as any addict breaking an addiction is. Often, these kids cannot explain what is different, as it is all they know. They see it every day. They don't know the reason why. Casey came the closest to putting it into clear words of any victim I have ever heard. Can you imagine watching your sibling get a new toy every day, and you have to watch her play with the adult who gave it to them, while you can't play with it? Same idea."

"So you think my client is guilty?"

"Someone has destroyed many lives here. He has damaged the lives of the individuals though rape and drugs. He has taught a fear of people, preventing their recovery. Now though, that may change."

"Will that someone, be you?"

"Your honor, I hoped they were all like Mistie, and a good pep talk would be all they needed." She looked at the young women. She looked back to the jury. "These women and children need years of help. Even then, it may be too little, too late for many."

"Thank you Ms. Argyle, you may step down now."

Mr. Adder sat down and gave the floor back to Mr. Gleam.

Mr. Gleam walked forward and called on Mistie Nova.

As she entered the stand, she felt warm, tired, and excited all at once.

Mistie looked out across the courtroom and saw the man she had called 'grandfather.'

"Mistie Nova, can you please explain to the court your relationship with this defendant."

"Your honor, I always knew him as my 'grandfather.' However, I have recently found out he may not be."

"Mistie do you remember being drugged, or any other inappropriate contact?"

"Yes and no sir. It's complicated. You see, I remember waking up many times from what I later learned were drug induced stupors. I would wake up hot, sweaty, with what I thought was pee between my legs. He, and sometimes his wife, stood with a camera at the bedroom door."

"What else do you remember?"

"Not much. It was odd, I didn't like being around them. I remember a dream of him breaking through a window to rescue me from the filthy place I lived with the woman I called 'mom.' Starvation will give you strange dreams."

The courtroom lightly laughed.

Mr. Gleam gave Mr. Adder a chance to question her.

"Ms. Nova. Why did you change your name?"

"I wanted a start a new life, without memories of a life when I had no ability to protect, or care for myself. I, as do all of the victim's, deserve a chance to live a normal life, and not be pushed into the victim role again by memories, neighbors, family, employers, or friends."

"That's a bit excessive, don't you think?"

"No sir. It happens. Someone sees a hint of fear in your face, a glance, or whatever, and they either become afraid of you personally, or the potential criminals they suspect you are friends with. Or, they decide to bully you themselves. Not a good prospect for a healthy life."

"Would you then recommend that these people who claim to be victims change their names?"

Mistie looked out at the rows of people. "Yes sir. Maybe not first off. Give them a new place to live, and a chance to find out who they really are, and build a new life with their real identity, not the fake one they have been forced to hide behind all of their lives."

Mr. Adder was finished questioning her.

At last, after what felt like years, she was able to walk off the witness stand past the old man who had ruined so many lives. Mistie sat between Justin and Emma.

Chapter 41

Merlish Faces Colby Haulin - Forever Young - Year 23

Merlish's brain swirled with fears as the trial progressed. He knew what was coming. He worried about how would he, and his team, would fare as they were called to testify. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth when Mr. Gleam called Liza's name. This was far more serious than the hearings they had already attended.

Liza walked slowly to the stand. As she sat down she glanced back at Merlish.

"Liza, you job was to interview these girls once a year, correct?"

"Yes sir."

"Was it a tough job?" Mr. Gleam glanced at his papers.

"Shouldn't have been. Should have been a half hour interview, plus travel time, and paperwork. Maybe three hours of work per girl per year. They moved a lot. More than twins in any other study."

"How would you describe the girls?"

"Quiet, shy, awkward. Nothing special, until they really worried me the last few years."

"You reported this to your supervisor after each visit?"

"Yes sir."

Mr. Gleam sat down.

Mr. Adder stood up. "Liza, did you think these kids were normal?"

"At first."

"What changed your mind?"

"Notes from teachers, and the sudden sexual advances of some of the girls, while others were excessively withdrawn."

"You have spoken to my client. Do you think he is guilty of hurting these girls?"

"He brought them into being, choreographed their moves, and kept them from having friends. If they admitted to having friends, they were forced to move."

"Do you have evidence of that?"

"Yes, in my notes. I would have to send him copies of Cal's reports. They always had to move if friends, or positive connections were reported."

Liza answered a few more questions.

Mr. Adder sat down.

She exited the witness stand.

Mr. Gleam called on Cal.

The court heard all the information Cal had given at his hearing.

Mr. Adder questioned him at length, trying to find a hole in his arguments.

Mr. Gleam called Merlish's name. His head swirled as he lifted it high.

He walked to the stand and turned to face the accused. This man he had known as Adam Jolin, he had trusted his life, and future to. Now, it looked bleak indeed for those young women, and other children.

"Merlish, did you hear me?"

Merlish glanced up.

Mr. Gleam looked at him.

"Sorry, sir, my head is pounding."

Mr. Gleam nodded. "Merlish you were the one in charge of this twin study, 'The Forever Young' study, were you not?"

"Yes sir."

"Why do you think it was named that?"

Merlish stammered. "I really hadn't thought about that sir."

"Tell us what you are thinking."

Merlish looked out onto the girls he had helped bring into being. "Your honor, if I look at those young women, they look awful young for their age. Was he using the drugs to keep them young physically as well as mentally? They are adult women now. They look barely old enough to be teens."

Mr. Gleam glanced at the rows of victims. "Merlish, you saw nothing wrong before the study began?"

"No sir."

"Or during the early years?"

"No sir. A few oddities. The girls moving a lot were part of the test parameters."

"Please tell the court how soon after realizing there was a serious problem you contacted me."

"After Cal's visit reports I had to pick myself up off the floor. Then, I had to be sure I had the data at hand to explain to you. Perhaps an hour to gather everything to be sure I could answer any questions you might have."

Mr. Gleam smiled. "That's reasonable. Mr. Adder, your witness."

Mr. Adder stepped forward and asked a few more questions. None of them seemed to matter to the case, and soon he was done.

Merlish could go to his seat.

"Mr. Gleam, any more witnesses?" the judge asked.

"No sir."

"Okay. We will rest this case until tomorrow."

The next day dawned clear and hopeful for Merlish as he settled into his seat to watch the remainder of the trial. This man he had spent so many years researching for. He felt guilty of creating the abusive situation, even if the court did not find him so.

Mr. Adder called Colby Haulin to the stand. He shuffled, handcuffed and leering to the stand. As he turned to sit down, he attempted to look each of his victims in the eye. Instead, they looked too high above him, as Trudy Argyle had told them to, only this morning.

"Mr. Colby Haulin, did you go by the name 'Adam Jolin' when you requested 'The Forever Young Twin Study' to begin?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell the court why?"

"I felt it was a good idea."

Mr. Gleam waited a few minutes. "Can you tell the court the purpose of this study?"

"To study how identical and fraternal twins fare, together, or apart in multiple environments under special circumstances."

"What were those circumstances?"

"I will not tell you. They are personal."

"Personal? Then you are not a scientist?"

"All people are scientists."

Mr. Gleam closed his eyes a moment. "How could the results help anyone, if they don't have all the information?"

"The results were only for me."

"Did you actively, or passively drug, or allow any of these people, to be drugged?"

"Everyone takes medication every day. It's normal. You have to find the right mix for each person so that they are happy in the life they are given to lead."

Sounds could be heard in the courtroom.

Merlish groaned.

"Mr. Haulin, why do you think you had the right to create the medications they were to take?"

"Someone had to do it."

"How did you choose the women in the twin study?"

"Friends of my daughter. Girls I knew who would do whatever I asked of them, as all good girls should. Their names gave their position in life. Names that meant no one would ever believe a word they said."

"Mr. Haulin, what were their names?"

Mr. Haulin licked his lips and looked out over the crowd. "Daisy, Rose, Jan, May, Summer, Sunshine, Sherry, Paige, Card, and Nana."

"What do you mean that their names meant no one would ever believe them?"

Mr. Haulin laughed. "They have unbelievable names. Names you only give an infant, or a pet. Not names that inspire trust or values. Not names you give a person who will have a career. Their parents intended them to be pets."

Mr. Gleam walked back to his notes. "Why should they be pets? And why your pets? Why not give them a chance?"

Mr. Haulin looked right at him. "I gave them the only chance they ever had in life. No one else would ever look at them. Girls are always ignored."

Mr. Gleam waited on the crowd to shush. "Mr. Haulin did you ever perform a monkey dance with any of these girls."

"Silly babbling things. No one ever believes a girl. They can't tell the truth for the lies in their eyes."

Mr. Gleam waited on the sounds to die down. "Mr. Haulin, did you ever take pictures of children with children, or children with adults."

"Of course sir."

"Sir did you ever have sex with any of these girls?"

"My sex life is a private matter. No concern of yours. Those pictures pay the most money. I had a lot of little girls to support. I needed the money." Mr. Haulin rubbed his hands together.

"Mr. Haulin, are you in any of these pictures?" He positioned a few on the screen.

Mr. Haulin leered at the photos on the screen. "Oh yes. Dancing with the children. Those pictures are of happy days. They have such a pretty smile on their faces."

Merlish closed his eyes. Those were pictures of girls with the funny look on their faces.

"Why does dancing not require clothing?"

The man laughed. "That is my concern. A man can dance any way he wishes with his children."

Merlish shuddered. If his wife had heard such words coming out of a man's mouth, the man would never speak again.

The new outburst in the courtroom took a few minutes to calm down.

"Mr. Colby Haulin, most of those people would never have existed if you had not requested this study, would they?"

"True. However, the young mothers had no one to guide them through life. I had to give them a reason to wake up in the morning. Babies were the best answer. The grant money they received to participate helped them with most of their bills."

"Is it true you forced them to move if the girls made friends?"

"Of course. The variable of friends for either the mother, or the girls, would destroy the study, invalidating it."

Mr. Gleam looked back across the courtroom as if waiting for someone to come in the door. "Mr. Haulin, is it true you refused to allow your own daughter a boyfriend of her own age?"

"Yes. She only needed me. There wasn't room in her life for anyone else."

"Sir, why did you feel that was your decision to make, and not hers?"

He stared at Mr. Gleam. "I paid for her. I raised her. She was mine. No one else had any right to her."

Mr. Gleam stepped back. "Mr. Adder, your witness."

"Mr. Colby Haulin, you let Mistie go. Why, if you are the person they portray you to be?"

"Sooner or later she would come back. They all did, except Ashley and her mom. They escaped, and I never found them again."

"How did you feel when Brandy died during childbirth?"

"She was one of my favorites." A wistful look crossed his face. "I will miss her. I have her baby. The baby can't take her place as there isn't enough history. Soon I will be free to go back to where I hid her baby."

"Mr. Haulin, tell us about you. What can you tell us about your childhood?"

"I don't remember much. No one ever does. It's merely a haze."

"Did your parents abuse you?"

"Why would you ask?" He laughed. "No such thing."

"Do you know when your first sexual experience was?"

The defendant laughed. "How could I remember that? That's a part of childhood in any family."

The outburst from the courtroom took a few minutes to subside.

"Mr. Haulin, think about what you said. Did you say you were sexually active as a child?"

"Of course. Every child is. All mothers love their little boys."

The sound in the courtroom grew louder. A few people vomited. When the noise settled down, Mr. Adder stepped back to say he was done with the case.

The judge asked the jury to step into the other room for the verdict.

Merlish felt sick himself, as he thought of the harm this man had done. Mr. Haulin showed no remorse for the evils he had done to these women and their children, or the young man whose career he had ruined before it even started.

The jury returned to their seats and the room became silent. The spokesperson stood up to read the list of charges. "Mr. Colby Haulin has been found guilty on all counts and charges."

"He abused his own child, and her friends, bringing them into a circle to continue the abuse through a twin project and rape of infants, children, and adults. This constitutes the abuse ring, as neither the children, nor their mothers, could escape his grasp, due to their forced addiction to the drugs he created to sedate and abuse them." The spokesperson turned the page.

"He has admitted to creating and selling child and adult porn for profit. At no point were these innocent pictures." The speaker continued with a vivid description of some of the photos that had been seen in court.

Voices echoed through the courtroom.

The judge demanded silence. He waved to the officers. "Justice will be served in prison."

Colby Haulin was led from the courtroom.

The crowd hurled insults at him. Others glared as if their eyes could bore a hole through to the man's heart. If he had one.

The man in shackles shambled down the aisle. He grabbed at a few young women on aisle edges.

They screamed.

He laughed as the officers pulled his shoulders to push him onward.

"He thinks he can make others be victims because he was one."

"This one man created hundreds more victims in his lifetime to replace his broken mind."

"What a pity no one ever rescued him."

"Hope he rots."

"He won't live a week after sentencing."

The people exited the courtroom.

Spectator voices echoed around Merlish. They condemned the man the jury found guilty, who had admitted his own guilt. This man too, along with his victims, did not realize that the life they led was not normal, was not happy, was not safe. What was really a normal, natural, healthy life?

Liza walked up to him. "You had no way of knowing."

"He covered his tracks as if he knew he was wrong. He doesn't seem to recognize he was wrong."

Trudy Argyle sat beside him. "Merlish it's all part of the lies they learn to live from infancy on. Think about it. He was taught to hide

it, and lie about it. At some point, if lies are part of your daily bread and butter, you begin to be unable to tell the difference between a lie and the truth."

"Do you think he told any lies up there?"

"Who knows? He probably doesn't know either. He will go to his grave believing what he wants is normal."

"Will you stay and help those girls, and even Adrian Shultz?"

She glanced to the door. Almost everyone was gone now. "I'm not sure. I will have to call my family first. I am not sure how much hope there is for the twin study girls. The others, I feel positive they can be helped. As for Adrian, he may decide he hates photography. I wonder if he has already destroyed his camera."

"Oh, I hope not. He takes good pictures."

"He has a great talent. It would be sad to see it lost due to this," Trudy said. "I will arrange a meeting with the survivors before the sentencing days. Maybe that morning to see if I can help them. I can't help them if they don't want help."

Trudy turned and walked out the door.

Liza and Cal were beside him.

Trudy would have to help them all.

Chapter 42

Family Finish Preparations

The kitchen had always been a place for dreams in their home. A place to share secrets, plan, and learn. Relics of those past days and nights were scattered deep in the cabinets. A broken plate, pieces of plastic, and even a stone hidden behind a pitcher.

The cabinets soon stood empty. They would remain filled with memories of the past, and wait for the future.

Helen wrote down the stories of each piece as it was collected. Those to be donated were wrapped and boxed up.

Fresh paint was on the walls. The new curtains were hung. Cabinets were filled with the items they did use.

"At least there will be no more leaning towers of plates," Quin said.

"Or lids tumbling out of drawers," Momma said.

The doorbell rang.

Helen answered the door.

Fritz followed in behind her, as she returned to the kitchen. "Hi everyone."

"What news do you have for us?" Momma straightened the towel.

"Well the court battles are ongoing. This last one gave us a surprise though." He sat down at the table.

"How so?" Helen asked.

"The accused decided to admit to most of the crimes she was accused of. Shocking really. Her attorney had no idea what to say or do."

"What will happen to her?"

"Most likely, prison for life, which won't be long."

"How did the other smaller trial go?" Eleanor said.

"It went good. Was concerned on that one. He, and his two partners, were all given recommended community service to be completed after the trials."

"Do you think that is right?" Quin asked.

"It will teach them more about survivors and abusers. It may even help them heal, which may be why the judge suggested it. Working with other abuse victims could help them recognize, and even save more."

"What happens next? When can we see Mistie?"

"It will be a while, Helen. Relax. They have the most difficult trial to go through. This next one will be painful for everyone. We are trying to keep it out of the media's light."

"Why don't you want everyone to know what happened to publicly condemn the criminals?" Tricia stacked the cloth napkins in their new holder.

"And condemn the victims as well? No, we must keep it quiet for their safety and life." Fritz pulled out a chair.

"I would think news of the trial would bring out more victims. Which would be a good outcome." Momma sat down.

"We already have far more victims than could ever be witnesses in this series of trials. While it may bring out a few more victims of these people, it isn't likely. Media would be more likely to stir up against the victims, and bring about copycat crimes."

"Why wouldn't more victims of other crimes come out to report them?" Tricia picked up her tea cup.

Fritz put his hands together. "No. In most long-term crimes, these criminals, and others with similar intentions have worked hard to build their victims trust. These victims have never known life to be any different than the life they lead. They have been conditioned that anyone who says life is different is lying, and will hurt them."

Silence filled the room. Not even a bird could be heard outside.

"Some watch television, but even that doesn't help. They don't see the crimes committed against them on television, but they figure that is because whatever happens to them happens to everyone, so why would it be on television? They expect it to tell them the unusual, not the normal parts of daily life."

"Is there any hope for Mistie," Tricia said.

Fritz smiled. "Mistie yes. She had already escaped before us finding her. The others, I don't know."

"What about my sister." Momma whispered.

"I cannot say."

Tears filled Momma's eyes.

"What hope is there for the victims" Tricia said.

"Not a lot. There must be no media attention. No one must know who doesn't need to know."

"Wouldn't that be lying?" Helen dropped a spoon on the counter.

Fritz glanced at her. "Yes, it is. We must sadly teach them to lie while being honest. You see, people are afraid of those who are different than them. They often see victims as perpetual victims who bring crime to neighbors simply because they do not know who to avoid. The good, honest people avoid them, so who do they turn to?"

"They must have a chance to start a new life. With new names if necessary, where they can build self-esteem and self-respect. They may even have to move again once they develop enough self-esteem and self-respect to lead normal lives. Even then, it's iffy at best."

"They will be years behind in building their adult lives." Quin stacked the papers in front of him.

"Decades likely," Fritz said.

"So once a victim, always a victim?" Tricia asked.

"We hope not. For their sake, we hope not. I'll come again as soon as I have more news for you." He stood up and left the room. He closed the front door behind him.

Tricia reached across to hold her mother's hands

Helen rested her head on her mother's shoulders.

Quin stood up and re-filled the teacups.

Momma walked out of the room and Helen followed her.

Helen's voice floated down the hall. "Or, they don't want other people to know their lives aren't all roses either."

Momma's voice faded away. "The old tattle tale."

Quin whispered, "He knows something about Momma's sister."

"That's why he won't give us any trial specifics. I wish we could know more." Tricia nodded.

Quin handed her a cookie. "I am afraid we will know bad news about momma's sister too soon."

"We must be strong for her." Tricia took a bite out of the cookie. Thinking the arbor planned for Mistie would ease her mind.

Gramma's old room was empty of boxes.

Quin, Helen, and Tricia had also used the room to store their belongings as they were each repainted and redecorated. Now, Gramma's old room would be fixed up for Momma.

"How would Momma will like the new room?" Tricia asked.

Quin tried not to splash paint on the floor. "As the matriarch now, she should have the nicest room."

"Yeah, but it was her mom's room. Do you think she will dream of her at night?"

"If so, only good dreams full of hope for all of us. How is the decorating class going?"

"Momma and I are learning while redecorating our house. We have a few clients lined up to visit next week. Do you need any carpentry jobs?"

"Not until the house here is finished. I have a few plans. I want to design Mistie's room myself, based on some research I've done."

Within days, Momma's new room was complete.

Tricia helped her mom move her clothes across the hallway, deciding what to keep, and what to give away as they went.

"Are you happy with the new room?"

"I think it's beautiful. It was a lot of work. I'm glad our family is pulling together while we wait."

"It is a dreadfully long wait. I hope Mistie does come to stay, and is happy here."

"All we can do is try."

The doorbell rang.

Helen ran down the hall.

"Momma! It's Fritz, more news!"

Tricia and Momma placed the shirts they were holding on the bed and walked down the hall.

Fritz waited for them in the kitchen, his back to the door.

"Can she come home?"

"Not now."

Quin walked.

"Tell us more," Momma said.

Fritz sat quietly for a moment, waiting on something. "No more news until the sentencing stage."

"There's more?"

"Yes. It could be a while. The last trial turned in a guilty verdict as well. There was no choice. The worst is over."

They smiled at each other, excited at the news.

Momma glanced at them. "What about appeals?"

Their faces fell.

"That could drag out the process for years, even decades. We can't put our lives on hold for that."

Fritz nodded. "Trust me. You will know more as soon as the sentencing occurs. It may be a day or two later for safety reasons."

"What does Mistie know about us?"

"Nothing. The person she knew as her mother confessed she was a stolen baby. That is all she knows."

Quin patted the table. "She can't know how much we want to see her?"

"No," Fritz said. "She is going through an emotional time right now. A new family might be too much. She wants to know. She has told me so. She isn't ready with everything else going on."

"Does she have anyone to lean on in such a tough time?"

He nodded. "She has two best friends, and their moms. It's more than any of the others have. She is fine. I only hope they remain friends after the trial is over."

"Such trials do make life difficult. As drawn out as they become."

"Putting lives on hold is never easy. It would be grand if society was able to serve justice in such a way so as not to punish everyone involved for such long periods of time. A quick return to life, not keeping the breaks on for years, or decades. People are so jealous of those who seem to go on living during these things. People feel left behind. A normal routine is forgotten. Often unemployment becomes the norm. Don't let it happen to you." Fritz pounded the table.

"She can come here and start a new life. Start over with family," Tricia said.

"Will you accept her friends?" Fritz asked.

Tricia looked around at her family's faces. Everyone else glanced at each other's pale faces as well. "Guess we will have to meet them to decide."

"These people have been her family for a few years now. I can say they are good people. Please don't take her from one set of

good family to another, and not let her keep contact. Trust me. Go study some of what happens when adopted children find their birth families. The transition is not easy."

He stood up and left the house.

The silence echoed as loud as the joy moments ago. At least the majority of their sister's trials were over. Now, it was a matter of time until she could decide who she wanted in her adult family.

Quin stood up. "Come on Tricia. We have shopping to do."

Tricia studied all the designs in the wood panels at the hardware store.

Quin made most of the decisions as they picked out the boards for various projects for Mistie's room.

She couldn't keep quiet anymore. "What if she doesn't come. Are we wasting our time?"

He was several steps ahead of her. He stopped and turned around to look at her. There were tears in his eyes.

"If she doesn't come, will you be mad about designing this bed, and fixing her closet?"

The board in his hands shook and slipped from his grasp. "If she doesn't come, it is all for you. That is why I decided you should come to. Momma has never, ever lived alone. She was a child like us. Then married. Then taking care of her mom. She can't live in that home alone. If you don't stay, I, or Helen, will. You'd be happier there than we would." He picked up the board.

"We may even take turns, leaving home, and coming back. Give Momma a few days to herself from time to time. We can never let her feel forgotten."

Tricia smiled and walked forward to hug her younger brother. "Thanks Quin. I appreciate it."

The next day, they painted the second largest bedroom a pale yellow with a light creamy border. The empty room looked so cozy. All it needed was a rocking chair, a blanket, and a good book.

Quin built the shelves into the closet first, before he designed the new bed frame to allow storage under the mattress. After all, Mistie had been out on her own, and likely had far more belongings than the rest of her siblings.

It was lovely, and Tricia almost wished it could be her room. Of course, it might be someday, if Mistie chose not to come, or to live nearby, and not at home.

Chapter 43

Patty’s Death

Mistie sat alone in the small hotel room she had lived in for the last few months of the trials. How accurate that term was. The time had really been a trial for her, and against her. She could have been in the same position as any of them at some point.

Her high school teachers had encouraged her to join the military. They would be proud of her now. If she had been Adrian Shultz, the same thing would have happened to her. Only, she wouldn't have known what was wrong. Or had anyone to stand up for her. She shuddered at the thought.

She hadn't seen any pictures of herself in the evidence. However, she knew they were probably there. They hadn't appeared on the screen as so many others had. Perhaps Mr. Gleam thought it might ruin her future. People who bought that sort of thing, might see her in ways she didn't know, or even want to know.

Her future stared back at her like a long lonely tunnel with nothing there, waiting on her decisions. A canvas to paint on, without even background color or texture. She needed a background, and fast, if she was going to color it in a healthy way.

No decisions could be made until the sentencing was over. She reached to the picture of her, Justin, and Emma on her table. Many nights, it had sat there, as only an old friend can. While they were often next door, she frequently preferred to be alone. The pain she was going through was hers alone.

What might she have done under the influence of those drugs? Did anyone know if she had taken them as a child? She was sure she had. She wasn't sure if she wanted to see the evidence. The biggest question in her mind, was had she, like Adrian, been under their influence as an adult? It was a fear she felt she would never forget.

The phone rang, pulling her more awake. She sat the picture down as she reached for the receiver. "Hello?"

"Good afternoon Mistie, it's Fritz. Could you, Justin, and Emma come around to the small meeting room in about an hour?"

"In the hotel, or the courthouse?"

"In the hotel is fine."

"I can be there; I'll check with Justin and Emma."

"Okay."

Mistie hung up the phone. Dazed from her waking nightmares, she walked to the room next door. She knocked.

"Come in," Emma said.

Mistie opened the door. "Hi Emma. Fritz called and wants to meet us in the meeting room in an hour."

"Okay." Emma glanced up from sewing a button onto a shirt. "Dear me. Are you okay?"

"What's wrong?"

"Did you sleep in that? Let's go back to your room. Your hair needs fixing, and you need some color. You weren't that pale at dinner."

Mistie let Emma lead her back to her own room. The mirror confirmed her pale face.

Emma fixed her hair.

"That's the best I can do. Go sit with Justin at the pool for a few minutes. I'll call you in plenty of time. If that doesn't add color to your face nothing will." Emma walked back to her own room.

Mistie smiled as she thought about how much Emma fussed like a mother hen over her. She almost enjoyed it for a few minutes, from time to time.

Justin talked to other guests at the pool. The long stay hadn't seemed to faze him as much as it had her.

She sat on a chair beside him while he talked.

Emma arrived to walk with them to the meeting.

Fritz, and an armed guard, talked in the corner.

Mistie drew in a quick breath. She grasped Emma and Justin's hands, afraid the guard had come for her.

Fritz looked up. "No Mistie. He's not come for you. Let the ghost leave your face for now, and sit down. Emma, close the door please."

As soon as they were settled, Fritz looked right at Mistie. "Do you have any questions for me?"

She gulped and nodded. "Lots of them."

"Well, I have a list I can answer. Start." He looked at his watch.

"Who am I, is one."

He nodded. "The answer will be given soon."

Her face flushed. She looked down at the table and whispered, "Am I as guilty as Adrian?"

Emma patted her hand, and Justin patted her back.

After a few moments of silence, she looked up.

Fritz watched her. "I'd rather not answer that. Which is probably an answer in itself. However, it might be better if you didn't know everything. It won't fix the past."

Her eyes were swum with tears. "Will I have to go to trial?"

"No. You are no more guilty than Tammy, Brandy, or even tiny Bria Jennell. We know that people under the influence of those drugs have no ability to know what is happening to them, or what they are doing. You cannot be held liable for actions at that stage. You did escape as soon as you could."

"Sir, how can you know the drug's true influences?"

Justin's hands tightened on hers. He turned to look at her. "They tried it on me."

Mistie pulled away. "I never let you near those people!"

Justin reached for her hand. "No, the investigators tried it. They gave me the drug to see how long it takes to take effect, and wear off. They did some interesting tests and videotaped the whole thing as evidence if necessary. They had to test it on someone. As a doctor, I had to volunteer."

"You are my friend. I don't want you hurt."

"One time couldn't hurt me. I was in a safe environment. No harm came to me, or anyone around me. I have to admit, the goofy look on my face in the video is hilarious."

"Did you have to?"

Fritz nodded. "We didn't need the evidence. We had to have it ready, just in case."

The other man made a sound.

Fritz looked at his watch. "The main reason you are here. This is the guard for Patty Jolin. She has requested to see you."

The room swirled. Mistie was hot, and scared as the tunnel in front of her eyes expanded. There she was again. As a spectator

this time, seeing herself as a small child, four, five, she couldn't remember the actual age.

Mistie shuddered awake from the dream. It was that haunting dream again. Lights flickered around the darkness above her head. Strange odors enveloped her body. Discomfort and pain. Skin burnt to a crisp, curled and peeled away. Fear. Her voice could not yell. She could not move, stuck under a weight that shifted and rolled like water.

The memory of that day made her gasp. Then, it swirled on again. To a later time, though not something she wanted to see ever again.

Her child-self ran down the hall to a room. She screamed and cried. As the tears subsided, she opened one clenched fist. A toy was broken in four pieces. Only, it wasn't a toy. It had been a gift from a friend. A special handmade item that had more meaning than the broken dolls that littered the dirty floor.

Child Mistie flopped onto the floor bed and sobbed until she could not make a sound.

The one who was supposed to be her mother had smashed it to pieces. The tiny pieces of wood would never grow back together. The paint had been peeled away. She could never ask her friend for a replacement.

Her mother stared at her thru the open door. No words of hope or comfort. No soothing look. Not even an apology. Her anger was spent. And forgotten. For the moment. A glance appeared that the young girl had never seen on her face. She turned and quietly closed the door, turning the lock as she did.

Frightened child Mistie ran to the door and attempted to open it. The lock wouldn't budge. There was only a little light from under the door. No windows in this tiny closet room. She sank onto the bed again to fall into a feverish sleep.

The tunnel again. Lights swirled. Her name was called.

Justin called for her.

Emma, with a worried look on her face, placed a wet washcloth on her forehead.

"It's too much for her, too soon. I don't think she should go." Emma said.

Mistie drifted, not quite aware.

"She doesn't have much time," the guard said.

"What do you mean?" Justin said.

"Mistie, can you handle another shock?" Fritz interrupted.

Mistie tried to nod.

Justin pulled her head over to his shoulder.

"That woman was not your mother. The woman she thought was her mother, was of no relation to her either." He glanced at Emma.

Emma grabbed Mistie's hands.

"Patty Jolin did not know what I am about to say. Neither did Melanie or Colby Haulin. Patty Jolin was your biological aunt."

Fritz stared at her, as if willing her to remain alert.

Mistie sobbed and turned away.

The man in the corner spoke up. "Patty Jolin must never know. Her doctor has given her only hours to live. She has begged to see you one last time. She refused to send a message. You have been cleared for a visit. We must go now, if we are going to make it before she dies." He stood up.

"Give us a minute." Emma patted Mistie's, and her own, face dry.

They followed the guard out the room to the waiting car.

Fritz rode up front, while Justin, Emma, and Mistie crowded into the back. When they reached the prison where Patty Jolin was being held, they were ushered to the medical wing immediately. Their ids were quickly checked. They were scanned for safety, and rushed down the hallway.

At the door to the room, the guard stepped aside. "You should go by yourself. Not sure how she will react to people she doesn't know."

Emma gave her a light push and whispered. "We will be right here."

Mistie inched forward to the figure on the bed.

The wraith's eyes were closed.

Mistie reached out her hand to the bony arm, and broken bones that never healed properly.

The light feathery touch woke the broken soul one last time. She glanced up, into Mistie's eyes. "Please forgive me. I am sorry for all of the suffering I have caused."

The shattered shell of the woman she had known as mom sprawled on the sheets. At last, she spoke quietly.

"I can forgive what you did in ignorance. You must forgive yourself to find peace."

The woman nodded, and seemed to slip into sleep. Within seconds she was awake, and screamed. "Get away. Don't touch me! It's broken."

Mistie backed off.

The wraith had flared up.

She settled back on the bed with a thump. The eyes were open, and stared right at, and through, Mistie.

"Peace." Patty's voice whispered.

The machines beeped higher, louder, and faster.

Mistie jumped.

The guard stepped in the room.

"Enough time. I hope she is at peace now." Mistie walked out of the room.

The gurney with the broken body was wheeled down the hallway.

She turned to Emma with tears in her eyes.

Emma patted her head. "It wasn't you. She really wasn't aware of what she said or did. You did all you could."

The image of the wraith haunted her.

They left the building.

Fritz drove them back to the hotel.

"Fritz, who am I? Who is she?"

"She is your aunt. Your birth family has been looking for you. They have re-decorated their house for you."

"Are they like her?"

Fritz was silent. He parked the car and turned to look at her. "I've been meeting with them for a while now. I'd like to think they are how you and Patty should have been, if you had been given the opportunity to grow up safe."

"The twin study. What about it and the other ten girls? Am I not related to them then?"

"Yes. Your aunts' eggs were used. The situation is complicated. I will explain it at a meeting in a couple of days. Get some rest. Today has been more trying than the trial dates for you, I think."

Emma helped her out of the car and back to her room.

It had been a rough day. A nap was exactly what she needed.

Chapter 44

Eleven Sisters - Forever Young - Year 23

Merlish walked to the small town's community center. Trudy and Emma had promised to have it prepared for the meeting. He really wasn't sure how to prepare it, or what to expect. At the entrance, he was ushered to a medium sized meeting room. He peeked in.

Emma stood on a chair, hanging some light-yellow poster board.

Trudy arranged tables and chairs.

They looked up when he entered.

"Hi Merlish, how many are coming?" Trudy asked.

"With the two babies, I would plan on twenty-seven counting us."

Trudy nodded and hurried back for more chairs.

"Are these the best chairs they have?"

Trudy placed the two cold metal folding chairs against the wall. "Yes. I wish they were more comfortable. In fact, these are meant more to cause pain and discomfort than anything. Too bad we don't have cushions, then we could all sit on the floor with the wall to rest our backs."

The receptionist opened the door. "How about tumble mats? We use them for gymnastics. If you help, we can bring four or five more in a few minutes." She ushered in Mistie, Joan, and Justin.

"That'll be fine."

Trudy and Mistie quickly worked to move the tables to one side of the room, with the chairs in front facing out.

The mats were brought in, and placed on the floor under the poster board. Not the best seating arrangement. It would give room for people to move around, and chairs as well as floor seats.

The young women began to enter the room with their mothers. Most of the young women took seats on the mats, as did a few of their mothers. There was no lively chatter, as would be expected in a gathering of this many young women. Only the babble of the two infants, and a few faint whispers. Looks more than words were passed around the room.

Unsure what to say, or even where to stand, Merlish walked to the center of the room.

Trudy, at the wall furthest from the door spoke up. "Hi, I'm Trudy. Merlish and I will talk to all of you, together as a group, and individually as you wish today. For privacy's sake, I will close the door. Is everyone okay with that? You may leave at any time if you wish."

Many exchanged glances. No one spoke.

Mistie, Emma, Joan, and Justin pulled chairs over close to the mats.

Trudy gently closed the door.

Trudy carried a chair to Merlish. "This was the best setup we could devise today. Sorry it couldn't be more comfortable. Merlish will tell his part."

Merlish looked at each of them, unsure what to say. "Ladies, you all know why you are here. Do you all understand how you came to be here?"

A few nodded, most of the younger women did not.

"Patty Jolin donated eggs so that most of the younger generation would come into existence. I regret the decision now to be part of this twin study. I apologize. I wish there was something I could do to fix it."

Merlish was having trouble talking. He couldn't deal with the unusual silence as everyone stared at him.

"What you don't know is who Patty Jolin really was. She didn't know. We didn't know. She was a stolen baby. Stolen from one family who did not know she existed at birth. Her birth to a Native American mother, was something the Baby Doctor did not approve of. He took the younger twin and sold her to the Haulins."

He looked around the room at the empty faces, and back at Trudy, wishing for help. A nod to continue was all the help she could give.

"Twenty years later, the couple went back to the same doctor to steal another baby for them. This is at the time the twin project children were conceived. Why he chose to steal another baby, and not have the original egg donor carry one of her own, I do not know. This child too was of Native American heritage. One of the last babies known adopted without permission before new adoption

laws were passed. Not that the Baby Doctor would have obeyed even those laws."

No sound met his speech. His hands shook in his lap. "Little did the man know, this baby was from the same family. She was Patty's twin sister's oldest daughter. The Baby Doctor allowed the mother to keep the younger, smaller twin, whom he didn't think would live."

He turned to look at Mistie.

She was pale as could be.

Emma, Joan, and Justin held onto her so she wouldn't fall out of the chair.

"While this woman had serious mental illness, there is reason to hope it was situational only. There is no sign of mental illness in the original birth family."

Trudy walked forward. "Now you know why he insisted the babies all be born at home. He feared they would be stolen. Two, in fact, were rescued by the states of the young women as soon as it was discovered they existed. Those children may be returned to their mothers; or may not, it is unclear."

"The problem is, this man was father to the young women here, and father to each of the four babies produced by Tammy, Brandy, Lottie, and Kelly. That being illegal, and potentially a genetic disaster, will make it difficult for the return of the children taken by the state."

Tammy and Lottie held their babies closer.

"I am here to help you. You will want to recognize that trusting yourself, and liking yourself are important. I know you were all taught to respect others by disrespecting yourselves. What I want each of you, of each generation to understand, is that if you do not respect yourself, then you do not respect others."

With that, Trudy looked at every individual in the room. Many squirmed.

"Do you want to know why, or how? It's simple. If your clothes are not appropriate for the cold of winter, or the heat of summer, how can you function effectively?"

She looked around the room again.

"If you have not eaten at least twice a day, how can you have the strength, or energy to take care of your child? Is it really wise to be fuzzy, sleepy, and leave a child to possible burn, or cut

themselves with knives in the kitchen while looking for food for themselves?"

She looked specifically at Lottie, Tammy, and Kelly.

"Many of you have learned that to eat daily is selfish. That only infants eat every day. Sorry. It is essential to eat daily."

She looked to Mistie. "Some of you have learned that using hot water is selfish. Everyone has the right to, and the need for, hot water."

"Ashley, please come tell your story." Trudy sat down.

Ashley walked forward, slowly, upright and smiling. "I am so glad to meet all of you. My eight full sisters, and cousin Mistie."

"I am only different than you for one reason. My momma found a friend and hid the fact. This friend found out about my nightmares, and spirited us far away to safety. There we lived in peace for many years, with Liza coming to visit me."

"How did Liza find you, and why did your mom allow her to come?" Merlish waited.

Ashley's mom answered. "I remembered it was a study. I figured two things could happen, first I didn't want the data disrupted. Second, if Colby Haulin went looking for me, Liza could be the first to know, and inform me."

"Liza knew you left?"

"Sure. I told her to tell you, you likely forgot. Later, I realized that was safest. After I realized what this man had done to me, and my daughter, for years. I am so glad she escaped pregnancy and will be a healthy, happy adult with few memories of the past."

Ashley walked back to her mom, and wrapped her arms around her neck. "Momma, I'll always be here to take care of you."

Merlish looked at the other mother and daughter pairs. While not exactly hostile, many sat apart, or facing opposite directions, as if looking at each other hurt, or brought up bad memories.

Joan walked to one of the tables and retuned with a tray covered with lunchmeat and chips. Trudy jumped up to help her hand out plates. They slowly walked around the room, trying to convince the women that food would feel good right now. It wasn't easy. Many of the young women turned away. A few of the mothers turned away, before they decided they might as well eat.

Ashley's mom sipped her drink. "Come on, eat. Ladies, we all started this journey together. Don't you remember the late-night parties we had while pregnant? How our parents didn't understand? As children, we ate every day! Go ahead and eat. Remember what food, real food, tastes like. We used to laugh together."

"You left." One mother said.

"I had to. I tried to convince a few of you to come too. You don't remember much, I know. It will come back. Reach out."

"What would help you all feel more comfortable?" Trudy sat the almost full tray of food on the table.

"TV," Kaylee said. "So we can see the odd things that they say and do that aren't real."

"Like what, Kaylee?"

"They eat all the time. It's fun to watch. They laugh, have friends, parties, all those made-up things."

"Kaylee, what would you say, if I told you, eating every day, having friends, and laughing, parties, and such, are all a normal part of life."

Kaylee looked as if she hadn't heard the words. So did most of the other young women.

Ginny though, had a faint smile on her face. She walked up to Trudy and whispered, "Can I have a cat?"

"Yes, cats and dogs are normal pets. You know what? Let's bring a TV and VCR in here. I have a program we can watch and discuss what is normal, and not normal family behavior."

Trudy managed to drag the TV and VCR rig in, plug it up, and start the program. An average sitcom. Nothing special, nothing that seemed educational to Merlish. However, the discussion afterwards brought some of the girls out of their shells.

"Let's meet here once a day, and watch TV together?" Trudy asked. "For a few weeks, at 10am, we can have the whole place to ourselves. We can have a snack, talk, and relax."

The women began talking.

Trudy turned the TV softly to a current sitcom and left it on. She walked over to Merlish.

"How do you do it?"

"Well, first I have to discover their discomfort and blocked zones. Then, I have to find a way to sneak in so they can hear the

truth. With the TV as background noise, they are talking, and getting to know one another. I have hope."

"Do you think they hate me?"

"No Merlish. They are afraid of you. It will take work way beyond the amount of time we have. After this is over, they may not see each other much. I hope that if they become comfortable with each other, they can go home and make new friends."

The door opened cautiously again. Mr. Gleam walked in followed by two women holding infants.

Kelly squealed and ran forward, reaching for first one, and then the other.

Brandy's mom stood up and walked forward.

Mr. Gleam smiled. "I have a surprise. The other two babies are here for a visit. This is everyone I hope." He walked up to Merlish, as everyone crowded around the infants.

"They are here?"

"Yes. We hope to return them to their families."

Ashley walked up. "Sir, does this mean the babies are our nieces and our half-sisters?"

Merlish turned to Mr. Gleam.

Mr. Gleam reached out his hand. "Technically, yes. Let's not worry about technicalities today. Let's enjoy the party."

A quiet party for thirty-two people.

A nice party in Merlish's eyes. There was some hope for these young women he had unknowingly wronged.

Chapter 45

Fritz Tells Helen and Family of the Other Ten Girls

Tricia sat at the kitchen table with tea and a plate of cookies. To Tricia, everything seemed so ordinary. She knew it wasn't. The extra empty chair sat. Waiting, as it had after Gramma died. "What time are we meeting with Fritz?"

"In about an hour. We need to put the food away and be ready to go." Momma rested her hand on her arm.

"It'll be okay. She will want to come."

Momma looked across at her daughter. "Dreams came last night. There is a lot we don't know."

"What dreams did Gramma send you?"

"No." She looked downward. "They were dark and confusing. Every time I would almost catch what was happening, they would change. Always on the tip of my brain."

"We won't find out if we don't go." Tricia pushed her chair back to carry her plate to the sink. She had seen a dream too. Confusing as it was, the images made no sense. Too many silent, scared women, what did it all mean?

When the family arrived outside Fritz's office door, they heard sounds within.

Hope rose in Tricia's heart. She opened the door.

Mr. Gleam and Fritz worked on an overhead projector on the table beside them.

Her hopes dashed, Tricia sat at the chair nearest the door.

Helen and Quin passed to the other side of the door.

Momma sat next to Tricia.

Fritz fiddled with the pencil in his hands. "Okay. The sentencing process has not occurred. However, we think we need to let you know more about the truth. It's not going to be easy. It's a long story."

"As long as Mistie is safe. Please tell us about Momma's sister too," Helen said.

Fritz glanced at Mr. Gleam and turned to begin the tale of the Baby Doctor. The story of the second baby theft ended.

"So my sister raised my daughter?"

Both Mr. Gleam and Fritz winced.

"Technically, semi - legally, yes." Fritz said. "However, we suspect that by the time you knew Mistie, it was more Mistie trying to take care of your sister." He explained about Patty's bipolar tendencies and drug abuse.

Momma and Tricia nodded their heads, remembering the few bits Mistie had told them when they knew her.

"Is. Is Mistie bipolar too? Are we at risk?" Tricia asked.

"We don't know. There is no reason to suspect any of you are bipolar. Though Helen is a more energetic than many her age." Mr. Gleam smiled.

Helen stuck out her tongue.

"We think she had a genetic mutation, unlike her sister, your mother, which was influenced, destroyed, whatever, by the drugs and abuse she suffered. By the time Mistie came along, there was no hope to cure her."

"Can we see her?" Momma leaned forward.

"She died in prison a few weeks ago. She never knew about you. Her last request was to see Mistie and apologize. Then, the bipolar reared itself again, at the last moment."

Tears dripped from Momma's eyes.

Tricia squeezed her Momma's hand.

"Did she apologize?" Tricia asked.

"Yes. She is no longer suffering."

A few moments of silence entered the room, almost deafening.

"Can we see Mistie now?"

"No." Mr. Gleam said. "It's complicated. There is more to tell. Patty's genes did not die. So there are others that may be at risk."

Tricia looked up at him. "What? I don't remember any other than a brother for Mistie."

Mr. Gleam nodded. "That wasn't all. Mistie didn't know about the experiment." Mr. Gleam spent an hour explaining the twin study.

"So, there are nine girls your age who may have the damaged bipolar gene, and four babies, one of which does not have a living mother."

The family sat in stunned silence.

That explained the crowd of silent people in Tricia's dreams. Was there hope for these adult children?

"They would be your cousins," Fritz said.

"Are we going to meet them?" Helen asked.

Quin sat quietly. How much did he guess, or know?

"We aren't sure. As we said, many of them are anti-social. We are not sure if their minds can deal with meeting new people right now. They are only beginning to speak to each other. They are afraid to say they have friends. It's a mess."

A life without friends? Sure, they had been home schooled many years, and friends were fewer and more important in their lives. Many were now working and starting their own families. However, they'd always be there for each other with only a phone call.

"They aren't like us, are they? How about Mistie?"

"Mistie has friends and a support network. She isn't sure what to do with all of her new-found cousins either. They are shy around her, and each other."

Fritz turned on the projector. "Here are a few pictures. We took this a few days ago at a party."

The picture showed the mothers, the adult children, and the babies arranged in a sober group.

Momma gasped.

"This next picture is of Mistie and her friends," Fritz said.

The people in this picture were arranged by a pool. Relaxed, although, the haunted look lightly covered their faces.

"It's been stressful for them as well."

"Next week, legal status must be decided for all of these young women. We have people working with them trying to help them. We don't know if they want, or can deal with more family. Mistie we know wants to meet you."

Tricia gulped as she thought about all of those people. They certainly didn't have room in their home, but what about their hearts?

"While I can say, don't get your hopes up, know that there is hope. That is all we have for today."

Momma stood up, and Tricia helped her out the door.

In the hallway, Helen took Momma's arm.

Quin held Tricia back for a moment.

"Did you know?" Tricia whispered.

"I suspected something. Fritz was too quiet, and the trials were too serious of a matter. It's had no media attention, so details were lacking."

"But you knew something?"

He stopped and lifted her chin up. "No, sis. I knew nothing definite, only that I had a feeling it was really bad. It's worse than even I suspected. I didn't want to worry you or Momma. We will find a way to visit them, even if it's only occasionally."

"Wouldn't that be worse? Didn't the abusers only visit occasionally?"

Quin nodded. "We will find a way to maintain contact if they want to. If not, there is nothing we can do."

Chapter 46

Justice is Served

Mistie entered the courtroom. Today, hopefully would be the last time, forever to enter the dark, dreary place. Walking to her seat, she saw only her cousins and their mothers. Stopping to say hello, and hear them answer was almost amazing after their silence of the last few months.

The door opened again. Instance silence. Joan, Trudy, Emma, and Justin walked in. The young women started a low chatter once more.

A few minutes later Fritz and Mr. Gleam walked in. Their chatter ceased quickly, although not instantly.

Mistie smiled. They were becoming more comfortable.

The judges' chamber door opened. The judge walked out, and smiled at the faces of the women before him. He sat down.

"Young women, this is a difficult day for all of you. No one else can enter the courtroom until this process is complete."

Fear and vacant expressions covered their faces.

"Here is the problem. Your egg donor was a stolen baby. She lived under an assumed name her entire life. Therefore, technically, all of you lived under assumed names. An assumed name without legal justification is illegal. Nicknames are normal, though." He tried to smile.

"This court has to follow the law. In your case, the court has decided to rule that each of you was adopted by the mother who carried you for nine months. One day soon, Ginny, Tammy, Sophie, Tara, Lottie, Ashley, Kelly, Casey, and Kaylee, you will meet the family your egg donor was stolen from. Don't worry, they are nice people. You will not be expected to have more than one contact with them if you don't desire to."

He glanced at each face. "On the issue of names. If you so desire, within the next six months, you may go through a legal process to change your name. You may find it helps to adjust to a new world with a new name. Hopefully, that day, and your marriage

day, will be the only other times you will be in a courtroom in your life."

The judge looked at Mistie.

"Mistie, your case is more complicated. You were also a stolen baby. However, it was evident in this courtroom that you had no knowledge, or even suspicion until the day it was announced by others. Do you agree?"

Mistie's mouth was too dry to speak. She nodded.

"Also, you have already legally changed your last name. Therefore, your current name is perfectly legally yours. Soon, you will meet your true birth family. May you lead a better life, and have no further need for courtrooms beyond marriage."

He waved his hand.

The courtroom door opened.

Spectators filed in for this last day.

Justin squeezed her hand, and Emma patted her shoulder.

The judge asked for silence as the spectators slowed to a trickle. Everyone quickly sat down, ready for the day's events.

The judge nodded to the policeman in back, and the first defendant was led into the room.

Blake Jolin stumbled and fell three times as he was led up the aisle. His mouth was open. He stared into space, unable to focus on where he was.

Mr. Adder helped him to his seat.

The judge glanced at him, then at Mr. Gleam.

"Mr. Adder, is your client aware of where he is, and why he is here?"

"No sir. The drug withdrawal has nearly killed him."

Rustling could be heard in the background of the courtroom. "Serves him right."

Mr. Gleam ignored the interruption. "Your honor, it is sad to sentence this man in this condition. However, the sentence he gave to his victims was not kind either. Let us hope they see this, and never end up here."

The judge looked at the skinny man. "Would a cup of coffee help him? He needs to be aware of the proceedings. I don't want to feel I am sentencing a man in a coma. It's not quite legal, if it is possible to have him alert and alive."

A cup of cooled coffee was brought.

Mr. Adder helped the defendant to drink it.

He stirred, and seemed more alert.

Mr. Adder nodded to the judge.

The judge looked at his papers. "Blake Jolin you have been found guilty of drug possession, manufacturing, and knowingly contributing and participating in a child porn and sex slave ring. Do you wish the full charges to be read to you?"

No comment was heard from Blake Jolin.

Mr. Adder said nothing.

"Sir, you will be sentenced to life in prison for your role in the abuse of these young women. You will be sentenced to twenty years for drug possession and manufacturing. Do you understand?"

Blake Jolin appeared to nod, whether in understanding, or drifting off to sleep.

The man should be away from harming others, for a time at least.

"I doubt you will live long. Your health reports are not good. He may leave the courtroom now."

Mr. Adder stood up and helped the officer attempt to stand Blake Jolin up. After a few moments, of the courtroom trying not to laugh at the antics of the sick man, another officer brought in a wheelchair to wheel the pale skeleton back to the prisoner waiting area.

"This guilty man must be given the right to twenty-four hours to reflect on his crimes against himself, humanity, and others. During that time, he will be heavily guarded." The judge glanced down at his papers.

A few people left after the first sentencing hearing.

Silence loomed again as the judge shifted his notes.

Mr. Adder and Mr. Gleam waited patiently.

"In the case of Patty Jolin who was found guilty of drug possession, drug manufacture, abuse of prescription drugs, incest with her son, knowingly, and unknowingly participating in a child porn and child sex ring, some peace has occurred."

He looked up at the crowded room, patiently waiting.

"As some of you know, neither I, not any court on this Earth can sentence Patty Jolin."

A slight murmur sounded.

"Sadly, or happily, she died a few weeks ago. Her sentencing will be carried out by a higher judge."

Mr. Adder clutched his notes.

Even the judge seemed saddened as he shifted his folders once more. He glanced at the back door again.

It opened to admit Melanie Haulin. This time, she was wheeled in, rather than taking up valuable court time while she attempted to walk.

As the police woman wheeling her reached the defendant's table, Mr. Adder moved the chair, and she was wheeled in beside him.

The room full of people waited quietly, rustling as little as possible.

"Melanie Haulin you have been found guilty of buying and selling of babies, and knowingly contributing and participating in child abuse through your own admission. For this, you will be sentenced to life in prison."

Not a sound was heard.

"The jury did not find you guilty on charges of drug possession and manufacturing, though you knew they were being used, and you gave them to many of your victims. Do you have any words to say to the court?"

She glanced at the judge, then back at the audience. "I only did what I had to. Any of you would have done it."

People shouted at her.

"You could have divorced him."

"Ran away."

"You didn't want pain. Why did you force it on others?"

At this, Melanie Haulin broke down and sobbed. She lifted her head. "I made it as painless as possible for them. If they had no memory of it, they would never know."

The judge pounded his gavel for quiet.

"This woman, Melanie Haulin has admitted to giving the drugs to the children. I think in a humanitarian way. Cruel as the purpose was, we do have to remember one thing. At the time, she was newly married, it was virtually impossible for a woman to obtain a divorce, especially without her husband's consent."

The room hushed.

"Not only that, it was expected for women to have children. So, after the first child, that she illegally adopted, she was stuck. There were few jobs available to women. None she was qualified for, and she could not financially support herself, or herself and the child. She knew, that if she left, the child would suffer the man's attentions without the drugs to soften the pain. She did the only thing she could, cruel as it seems to us."

"Her life in prison will likely be short. No matter how much we can understand her reasoning, she has suffered in ways we can never understand. Her mind is as broken as the daughter she raised. Only in a different way. Does she deserve twenty-four hours to think about her crimes? Perhaps not. However, she will be heavily guarded for those twenty-four hours."

He raised his arm, and the police woman slowly wheeled the sobbing woman away.

Mistie turned away. There was some truth to the judge's argument. Even if the law would condemn the woman.

As she was wheeled down the aisle the judge continued. "In no way is her behavior condoned by this court. However, it helps us all to understand how, and why, people do the things they do to survive, and help others survive."

Slight muffled conversations reached Mistie's ears as they waited. Snippets of sounds that almost made words.

Colby Haulin walked into the courtroom. He ambled slowly up to the defendant's table.

When he sat down, the judge looked at him, then shifted his folders once again.

"Mr. Colby Haulin, you have been found guilty of child sex slavery, child abuse, child theft, and child porn. These charges have given you a lifetime sentence in prison."

The man was unmoved by the sentencing.

"Mr. Colby Haulin, you have been found guilty of creating and manufacturing drugs in order to maintain control of the people you abused. Sadly, the sentence for this can only be ten years."

No movement or sound from the defendant.

"Mr. Colby Haulin, do you have anything to say to the courtroom?"

"Sir, I have done nothing unusual. Everyone lives like I do. I don't see why you think it is wrong."

The room went wild.

Mistie heard only snatches hurled at the prisoner.

"That's willing partners, not drugged ones!"

"Only if more like you are left to make it so!"

"One man created dozens of potential future offenders, dozens of warped minds!"

Spectators hurled papers, as well as insults, at the man she had known as her grandfather.

The judge pounded his gavel.

The insults stopped.

"This man believes his world is true. We know it isn't. He attempted to make his victims believe his version." The judge glanced at the young women. "We hope they know better now."

I know better. Mistie thought. Will I do better?

"While what he did is evil and wrong, he had lived stuck in that world since a child. Perhaps he never had anyone tell him it was wrong. We will never know for sure. A life sentence plus ten years will never give his victim's back their lives. They must take them back themselves, lost years and all."

Too many lost years. And too many lost futures.

"Evil as this man is, he should have twenty-four hours to think about what he has done. While I deeply doubt he will realize his error at this late stage, it is possible."

The judge pounded his gavel.

The man was led away, snarling at the noisy courtroom of spectators.

The judge then dismissed the spectators, except the victim's rows.

As they sat nervously waiting, the noisy room emptied and the doors closed.

The judge tried to smile at them, and failed. "Ladies, I want you all to know something. I want today to be the last day you ever hear yourselves called a victim. You are brave. Every one of you is a survivor. You have survived things that society calls brutish, evil, and condemning. There are many out there who will expect you to continue those ways."

He looked at each one carefully. "The world looks at your past as abnormal. You see it as normal, as that is all you have known."

A few sobs echoed in the courtroom.

"From here on out, you will find a new, healthy normal. As bad as secrets are, not everyone needs to know about your past. Teach your children to keep no secrets from you. Teach them to keep no secrets from others. Though you may hold the secrets of your past in your memory, don't keep them in your hearts."

More sobs could be heard.

"As survivors, go out, and save the world from people like the ones who have been tried here."

The judge looked at the young women one more time, before he stood up and walked from the courtroom.

Chapter 47

Merlish, Cal and Liza on Future - Forever Young - Year 23

Merlish unlocked the door to the warehouse. He flipped one light on. It was now empty. All records had been sent to a secure storage site. The few computers and boxes of floppy disks would be moved to a small office, so he and Cal could complete the final study analysis in a publishable format.

Cal and Liza would be here soon. He dreaded this moment. The sentences had been given. The trials were over. They were legally free. Mentally, they would never be free of what they had unknowingly been a part of.

The door opened and Cal walked in. "Guess I should bring the stuff to the door while we wait on Liza? I'll have the truck tomorrow."

Merlish nodded.

Cal moved the computers and two boxes of floppy disks.

Merlish decided to help.

Once the items were stacked by the door, Liza opened it. She closed the door and stood there.

"What's the plan? Do we work together in community service, or separately?" Cal asked.

They both stared at him. "I'm not in charge anymore. Really, I'm not. What do you both want?"

"How about we each do something different, then meet back in a month to discuss it." Liza turned away.

"Are we going to stay in contact with Mistie, and the other women, or not?" Cal asked.

"For a few months anyway. They have our new office number. Liza, where do you want to go for community service?"

She glanced at them, then at the computers. "I want to see if I can work with a special education classroom. Those kids need help, and sometimes, they may be being abused, and no one knows it. That may be the reason some of them can't learn, too busy trying to stay alive to focus on what seems frivolous."

Merlish nodded. That made sense. "How about you Cal?"

Cal leaned against the wall. "I have been trying to find ways to find hidden survivors. Maybe work with hospital social workers to learn what to suspect, what to not suspect, and how to help those who are ready to be helped to escape. What are you going to do, no longer boss?" Cal grinned.

"Retiring isn't happening. I really don't want to work in an abuse shelter, or an abuse hotline. I am thinking of working with the police who go out on domestic violence runs, helping them assist people who want to start a new life."

It would be his punishment.

And a chance to rescue others.

Mistie would always be with him, in memory. As would all the women in the "Forever Young" project.

Chapter 48

Bittersweet Reunion

Tricia, Momma, and Quin sat at their kitchen table. The news of the nine cousins, and four infants had been devastating. It was bad enough to know Mistie's life had been harmed, and to find out about Patty. The shock of the many more had been almost too much for Momma.

Momma stared into her coffee cup.

Quin folded a napkin. "Momma we have too much emotion here. We've worked to make this place feel more like home for us. Not to be selfish. If they come here first, and problems happen, we won't be happy here either."

"Not to mention the lack of room," Tricia said. "We can have it in a neutral place, somewhere no one has any emotional attachment to."

Momma glanced at her daughter. "I know you mean well. We promised to bring them home. Your Gramma wouldn't like it."

"We promised to bring Mistie home. And we will. We have to give them time to feel comfortable being invited to our home," Tricia said.

"She's right, Momma. Think about it. These girls moved frequently. They are not used to their own home being safe, nor that of the people who abused them. The last thing we should do is bring them into a home, and expect them to feel at home."

Momma smiled at his choice of words. Her first smile in days.

"You are right, I suppose. So we have a gathering at a reception hall near here, and see how it goes?"

"Sure. We can invite them all to come, and let them know we don't expect them all at once." Tricia stacked the clean plates.

"Do you hope only Mistie comes?" Momma said.

"I want to know my sister. I may be selfish. I want to know her first, and the others can tag along a few at a time, if they wish. You can't build twenty new relationships at once."

Momma placed her hand on Trisha's. "I know. I am tired I guess. Too much excitement. Too many emotions."

"We are truly sorry about Aunt Patty, Momma." Quin said.

"You couldn't fix her, and neither could I. I guess it is better we never knew her, or the pain she suffered. Now Tricia, go set up the meeting."

Tricia stood up and the phone rang. She answered and was surprised to hear Fritz's voice on the other end.

"Hi Tricia. Don't worry; everything is fine. In fact, I am offering a little help. Trudy has been a marvelous help with the young women. I thought you should talk to her to arrange the meeting. I didn't want to give her your number. Come on out in an hour and see what you can set up."

Tricia smiled. "Sure Fritz, I'll meet Trudy, if she can help make the meeting go better."

Trudy and Tricia spent three days planning and arranging the gathering. Trudy had to meet Momma, Helen, and Quin to determine their roles in the meeting, as well as give little updates about each of the other young women. She was able to get decent school pictures from Fritz, so that Momma could see they had grown and changed through the years.

The day of the party dawned bright and clear. Tricia remembered Trudy's instructions and didn't wear her brightest outfit. Something nice, simple, and pretty. In the car, on the way over, all four chattered. Their voices were unsure, and they had no memory of the words spoken only seconds before.

Mistie stood by herself in the building.

Tricia ran to her. As if they were young girls all over again.

Mistie turned at the sound of her flying feet.

Both stopped and smiled.

Tricia shyly held out her hand. "Hi."

They wondered off into a corner to talk.

Trudy talked to Momma.

Quin and Helen were busy helping two other women set up the buffet table.

"It's good to finally see you again."

As they talked, the other young women and their mothers entered the room.

Trudy encouraged them to the buffet table, and many did eat a reasonable amount.

The young women mingled with their birth family.

Fritz walked into the room. He talked to Trudy for a minute.

Her face paled. She put the platter down she was carrying and walked into the group.

He held up his hands. "Sorry to interrupt everyone. It is wonderful to see you all interacting so well. I have some news."

Fritz waited until he had everyone's attention. "You may want to sit down." A few people did.

"Well, you are all finally fully free."

He waited to let that sink in.

"Two days ago, Blake Jolin died from the drugs he had taken for so many years. His death was painful. Both to him, and to those who watched him die. I hope none of you ever suffer half what he did, though I am sure it was deserved."

A few murmurs passed through the women.

"Also, late last night, the guards at both maximum-security prisons were distracted. Melanie Haulin is dead. No one saw who did it. The cameras missed it too, only inches out of view, her head was bashed in with a chair."

Shudders went through the room.

"The guards attempted to save her. The prison nurse grabbed a fluids bag that had been mislabeled. No idea if it was before, or after the bag entered the prison. She never stood a chance. She cannot harm another child."

He glanced at the faces.

Trudy nodded him onward.

"Last, Colby Haulin was also attacked outside of camera range. There wasn't much left for the guards to remove. Plenty of blood for the janitors to clean up. That's about all. You will never see or hear from them again. That shadow will not hang over your lives."

He turned and walked out of the room.

"We can all move on with our lives now. Remember if you ever need me, I am only a phone call away. Enjoy this afternoon." Trudy wrung out the towel she had wiped the table down with. She walked back to the kitchen tables and watched out over the crowd of women eating and talking as if they were old friends.

That should bring some closure, to Mistie at least.

Mistie had gone to find her friend Justin and introduce him to Momma.

She smiled at the thought.

Momma had to accept that her newest daughter might be her first child to marry, if they stayed together.

"He does love her." Joan said from behind her. "She has promised never to marry though. Or at least not him, as she doesn't want to lose her close friendship with Emma."

"That wouldn't happen, would it?"

"It might. Anyway, she made me promise to look after him. I might. He is nice, and a good match for her, if she were healed, and he hadn't lived through so much with her."

"You would think that would make it easier."

"In a slow world, it might. In a fast world, it might not. The memories that tie, can also cause tears, sometimes those tears cause wounds that are easily ripped in the wrong way."

"I hope we can all be good friends." Tricia said.

"What are your dreams?"

"I have never really had time to think about them. Gramma was sick a long time. Then the search for Mistie. I didn't have time to dream."

"She has a few, or had some. Not sure now. Give her plenty of time and space. Let her know you want her to visit. Find your own dreams, that will encourage her more than anything."

"I want Mistie and I to regain what we lost."

"You can't regain. Only build from now. Don't neglect your future. She won't neglect hers, even if she doesn't know what it is today." Joan hurried to join Trudy at the food table.

Mistie came back to talk to Tricia some more. They talked for hours, even after everyone else left.

Even though they truly were identical twins, they seemed to have little in common.

Mistie and Justin drove Tricia back home, and they walked in to see the house. They didn't stay long, though she did promise to come back soon.

Tricia stared out the window as Mistie and Justin pulled away.

A promise made. Hopefully, a promise kept.

Now, if only they could find some common ground to connect on.

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Thank you for reading Shadows in the Mirror. If you enjoyed it, please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite online retailer and share it on social media. Choose another fiction, or nonfiction, title to explore on your journey through the myths society has encouraged us to live by.

Thanks!

Abagail Brown

About the Author

Abagail Brown has lived, and continues to live, with the subject matter in her fiction and non-fiction. An abusive past, multiple disabilities, gluten intolerance, and self-publishing are subjects she knows about from the inside out. She lives now in a supportive environment with a loving husband and furfriends Rocky and Mel. With the aid of cats, dogs, and art, she reaches out to help others stumble less along the path to a future for all, regardless of their past, present, or future.

Other Books by Abagail Brown

Cracks in the Walls

Surviving isn't easy.

Abuse often starts before awareness of self and others.

Abuse is normalized.

Survivors know no other life.

A few escape.

Read their histories.

Recognize those you know who may need a nudge to acknowledge the abuse they suffer from in their daily lives.

Prevent continuing the vicious cycle of so many who merely exist throughout their lives.

Teaser Chapter

Cracks in the Walls

The orange locker slammed. Morning classes hadn't begun. The stillness startled Jo. Students should have been here.

"Jo!" Karen shouted down the empty hall.

"What? I'll be late. I'm going to sing with my cousin tonight."

Karen ran to her. "Any news about Anne?"

"No." Jo turned away. Anne. The cousin who had once shared her name. She had been gone for two weeks.

"She's not been her normal cheerful self. I haven't heard her preaching to anyone in the halls. Her eyes looked at the floor more than ahead the last time I saw her. And."

Hope wound its way through Jo's mind. "And?"

"She gave me her calculator. I needed it for a Trig test, and didn't have the money for a good one to only use a few times." Karen held out the scientific calculator. "Surely she meant to loan it to me for the day. I haven't seen her to return it."

Jo sighed. No help. Anne had been distant from all of the family in the valley for months. When she disappeared, it had ruptured the tight-knit family community. "Keep it for now. I'll find her. She'll be back."

Jo placed her books on the lunch table beside Karen. "Only lunch meat?"

Karen nodded.

"Look, if you need food." She had offered before.

"No. I'll manage." Karen swallowed the last bite of lunchmeat and turned to her history book. "This history book is too short. Thousands of years of history are missing."

"Yeah." Jo opened her lunch bag. Nothing looked good. Even her mom's soup didn't smell good. Karen wouldn't be able to live her dream of becoming a lawyer without proper nutrition. "Here, take the soup at least. The chips I will eat tomorrow."

"No." Karen turned back to her book.

"Yes. Take it. I think it stinks."

Karen pushed her book aside and opened the container. "Smells fine to me. Or, are you referring to Anne?"

Jo glanced around the lunchroom. "Anne. I had an email from mom."

"Tell me."

She grinned. "Not unless you eat the soup, and promise not to return it."

Karen eyed her. Her hands shook. She pushed the book away. "Give me your spoon."

At least it would give her a minute to figure out what to say.

Karen pushed the empty container and spoon back to her. "Tell me."

Jo closed her eyes. If only she knew sign language. No one would overhear the conversation. "Let's go outside."

Karen glared at her.

"I promise."

Karen gathered her books.

Jo led the way outside, and across the street to a spot where anyone approaching would be heard or seen.

"Well?"

She couldn't stall any longer. "She's pregnant."

"What? After all her religious chatter, and not even holding hands with Lennie after dating two years?" Karen laughed.

"It's not Lennie's. She married Kyle."

"What?" Karen sat down. "How can that be?"

"I've no idea. I don't know why Kyle. He is gross."

"Yeah, that playboy came from somewhere. I can't believe she fell for him."

"It's not like her." A coyote stood a few yards away in the open field. Jo motioned to show it to Karen. "This isn't the Anne I know."

"She's your cousin. Call her."

"And mom's favorite niece. I will never be like her."

"All the more reason. Does Lennie know?"

"Oh. I doubt it."

"Here he comes now." Karen shifted her books.

"I don't want to tell him."

"Tell me what?" Lennie glanced at them both. "I saw you leave the lunchroom. Is this about Anne?"

Jo glared at Karen. "We need to talk to her."

"Jo. Tell me. You owe me that."

She had convinced him to ask Anne out instead of her years ago for a family party. It had been fun to watch him escort Anne everywhere in the valley full of relatives swarming from local towns, and singing at every opportunity.

"Sit down." Jo sat on the hard ground. "Karen keep watch."

Jo described the email.

Lennie clenched his fists. "She's changed since that call. I listened and didn't push her. Maybe I should have."

"What call?"

"The one two days after her eighteenth birthday."

"I don't know about it." Jo leaned closer to listen.

"A woman called, and said she was Anne's real mom."

Jo laughed. "Is that all? Everyone knew she was adopted."

Lennie looked up with tears in his eyes. "Everyone. Except her."

"How could she not know?"

"Was it ever mentioned?"

"Doubtful. No need to. Everyone knew."

"She didn't." Lennie pounded the ground with his fist. "Until her birth mom called, and she decided she isn't worth anything, and doesn't deserve anything in life, because she doesn't live with her real family."

"Did she say that?" Karen leaned toward them.

"Yes." Lennie stared out into the open tangled underbrush. "I thought giving her time to think like she wanted was a good idea."

"We need to go see her." Karen said.

The school bell rang loud and clear.

"We will all go there tonight. I'd rather go home anyway." Jo stood up and offered her hand to Lennie. "I'm so sorry."

"Cousin Nani has this new idea she wants us to try. Thinks I'll be a star someday."

"Hey, are you two sisters?" A male she didn't recognize stood at the door.

"No. Best friends. Who are you?" Jo stared at the unknown boy in front of her.

"I'm Chris. I'm new here." He held out his hand.

"Sorry my hands are full. You are welcome to come to the Deserted Forest to listen to the singing practice. Cousin Nani Forester directs the singers." Boys. No time for them.

"I don't know where it is." His clutched books shuffled, and almost fell out of his arms.

"My mom drives the van."

"I'll ask to go another time." He ran to the side door.

Jo's mom waited in the Deserted Forest van. "Have a good day?"

"Hear from Anne?" Jo held the door open and watched her mom's face.

Her mom winced. "She's home. We will talk about it later."

Jo put her hand on her mom's arm. "No mom. Now."

The side door slid open and a few more students climbed in.

"Later." Her mom gripped the steering wheel so hard, her seasoned hands turned paper white.

Jo leaned back in the seat. What had gone so wrong? Aunt Mary had been in tears for two weeks. Uncle Dan had driven to White Sands looking for Anne. He'd even promised to drive to Roswell if she wasn't found. Someone there would surely find her.

At Deserted Forest, her mom parked the van.

The other students hurried out to prepare for an evening of music.

Her mom walked around to help her carry the box of snacks. "She's not well."

"I figured that much." Jo pulled the door shut.

Her mom put her hand on her shoulder and looked her in the eyes. "Anne and Kyle eloped. Aunt Mary and Uncle Dan are shocked. They went to talk to Kyle's father."

"She was engaged to Lennie. She has been for two years. Why?"

"I don't know. You are going to have to talk to her. It can't be true." Her mom sat back in her seat.

"Did she say why?"

"No." Her mom turned away. "I have to go pick up a few more people. Be back later."

"Wait for me. I'll go with you." Jo stalked off to the house carrying a box of chips.

The front door opened. Kyle blocked the entrance.

Jo stopped.

"Hi Jo. Anne and I are back. My baby will be here next year." Kyle's hands rested on his hips. His grin was too big for his face.

She shivered. "Is Anne here with you?"

"Of course not! She is at home. Where she will remain."

Not good. Where had Kyle come from? When had he appeared in town? "I need to go to the kitchen."

He moved out of the opening enough to let her pass.

She hugged the box tighter and walked through the door.

Kyle patted her bottom.

"You choose Anne. Leave me alone."

"You wouldn't have me."

"No." Jo walked to the kitchen. She wanted to run. To take Anne. And run far away. That wouldn't be fair to Aunt Mary and Uncle Dan.

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